

# Africa's coup crisis





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## INTRODUCTION

**A**fter the military took over in Sudan in October, 2021, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of “an epidemic” of coups in the region. Even he, however, could not have predicted how much worse 2023 would be.

Last year, a senior African Union official, Moussa Faki Mahamat, expressed concern about “the resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government” in the region<sup>1</sup>. Across the Sahel, this type of change has now become the norm.

A coup d'état is defined as an attempt by a military or civilian group with formal ties to a national government to overthrow the sitting executive. Since 2020, there have been a series of coups in former French colonies in West Africa: two in Mali, two in Burkina Faso, one in Guinea, and one this year in each of Niger and Gabon.

Decades after a spate of coups in the post-colonial 1960s, it appears the phenomenon is back with a vengeance, causing chaos across the Sahel region of northern Africa. The Sahel, which stretches across the continent, marks the transition zone

between the arid Sahara to the north and humid savannas to the south.

Of the 486 attempted or successful coups carried out around the world since 1950, 214 of them took place in Africa, the highest number in any region, and 106 were successful<sup>2</sup>.

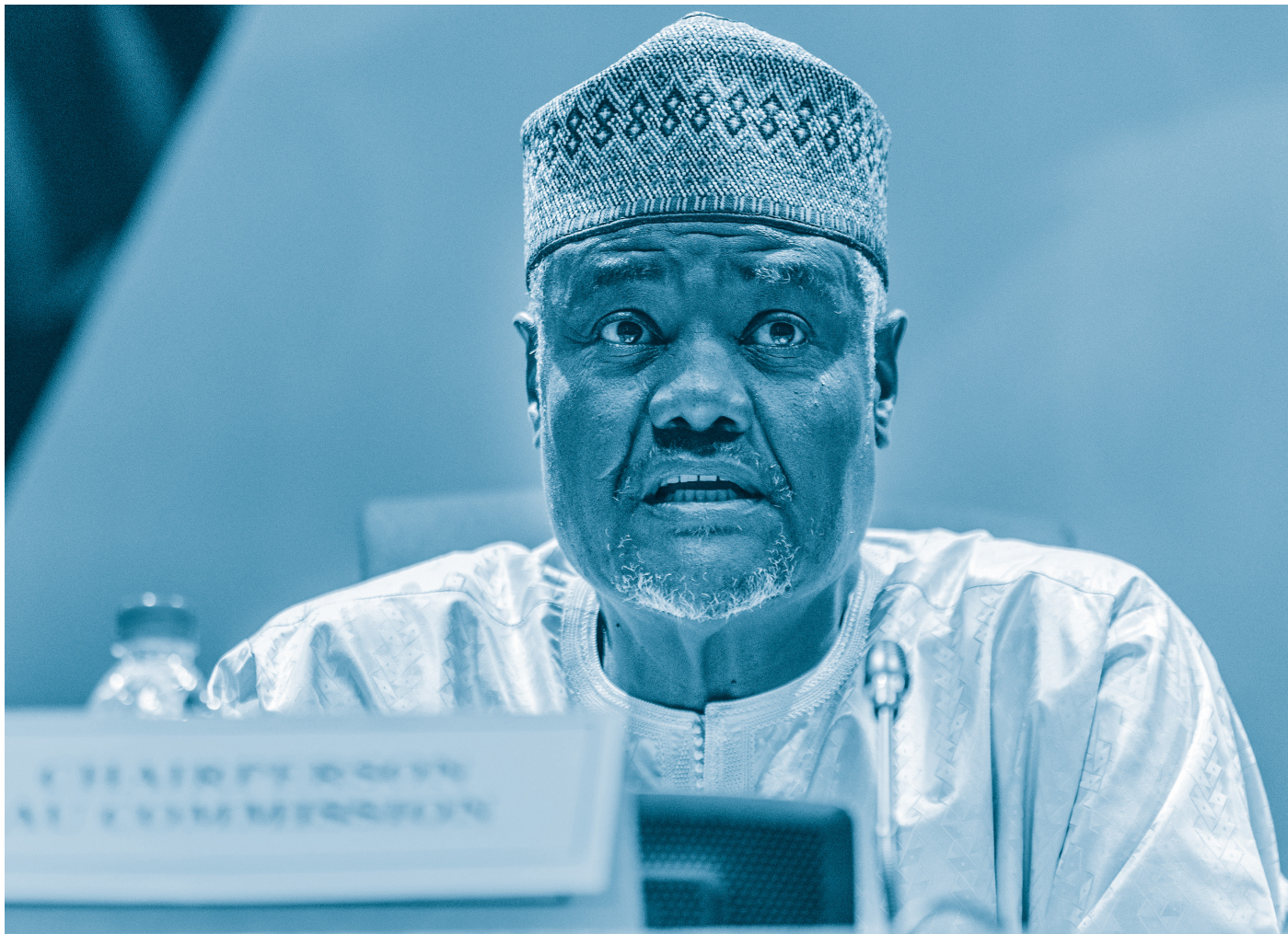
In searching for the reasons behind this trend, and seeking to identify the most effective responses from regional and international perspectives, it is important not to ascribe simplicity to complexity.

Are recent examples of the phenomenon primarily a product of anti-Western sentiment? Certainly, Africa's colonial history is a powerful weapon for coup leaders to wield, and anti-French sentiment has been used as justification for such actions. Images of crowds in Niger protesting at the French embassy and waving Russian flags<sup>3</sup> have reinforced this notion of the coups being symptomatic of the longstanding struggle between imperialism and independence.

Despite claims by French President Emmanuel Macron that he is trying to adopt a more sensitive and enlightened policy towards the region, analysts are correct when they make the point that “Western partners should be more sensitive to public



*There have been a series of coups in former French colonies in West Africa*



opinion when making political choices for African countries<sup>4</sup>.”

However, the balance between Western and Eastern powers is changing and people are also asking if the Sahel region finds itself at the heart of this new great game of geopolitics and whether, for instance, “Russia and newly assertive middle powers (are) offering themselves as partners to putschists<sup>5</sup>.”

## THE COMPLEXITIES OF COUPS

The conditions that result in coups, and the nature of such political events themselves, vary hugely and there is a danger that, when viewed from other parts of the world, the recent events might all seem interlinked and driven by identical causes.

In fact, there are myriad triggers for coups, drawn from a combination of factors including sudden increases in poverty, historic instability or corruption, and a multitude of actions that could be put down to “bad governance.”

Other factors that can help lay the groundwork for a coup include declining respect for the rule of law, a shrinking civil-society space, and the growth of more hostile attitudes toward international interference.

**The AU Commission held a meeting on May 2, 2023, to discuss the Sudan crisis and efforts to urge a ceasefire. AFP**

Wider geopolitical events also play a part. The recent experience of the biggest global pandemic for generations followed swiftly by the worst conflict on European soil since the Second World War have catalyzed events in African states with long histories of instability and political change.

Military rule might appear rather appealing to the population of a country racked by institutional chaos. Armed forces can appear to be a disciplined, hierarchical and well-organized alternative. Indeed, there is a natural tendency for citizens to expect that the organization and spirit of the military will be transposed onto the management of society and political affairs. It must be said, however, that empirical evidence suggests this is usually not the case.

Bram Posthumus, an expert on the Sahel region, put it most succinctly. Coups, he said, “do not usher in an era of stability. They usher in eras of instability. And they have given the adversaries, the non-state armed groups, the opportunity to increase their influence and their writ and the areas they control. So, no improvement of security in the Sahel after the coups. The contrary has happened. A deterioration of the security situation<sup>6</sup>.”

Beyond the effects of the COVID-19

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pandemic and other global issues, coup states in the Sahel have faced long-standing challenges in dealing with terrorist groups. Such are the chronic levels of insecurity, UN peacekeeping missions have been deployed in many of them.

Interestingly, the current coup crises are also triggering a rejection of these international missions. For example, the most dangerous peacekeeping operation in the world, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, is set to end its decade-long deployment by Dec. 31, 2023, following a request from the post-coup government.

One critical factor influencing the likelihood of a coup is the structure of a country's armed forces. The concentration of men, arms and troops outside of government structures is an obvious recipe for a potential challenge, as testified to by the recent coup-like events in Russia<sup>7</sup>.

In Mali, it is likely that the rejection of the UN peacekeeping mission in favor of a greater reliance on foreign private military companies will only increase the chances of further political upheaval in the country.

The Wagner Group, a notorious Russian private military company, has framed its presence in Mali as helping to fight the anti-colonial struggle there<sup>8</sup>, yet its actions would appear to be throwing more fuel onto the fire.

**Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso signed a security pact on Sep. 16, 2023, promising to aid each other in case of rebellion or external aggression. AFP**

Between Dec. 1, 2021, and June 30, 2023, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project recorded 298 events of political violence involving the Wagner Group in the country<sup>9</sup>. ACLED highlighted the group's independent operations, those carried out in collaboration with the Malian Armed Forces and with the Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo militias in the Mopti and Segou regions, and those that took place more sporadically alongside ethnic-Tuareg pro-government militias in the Menaka and Gao regions.

## HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Beyond the challenges of governance there are wider processes of demographic and economic change that can create fertile coup conditions. The Sahel region has been particularly badly affected by climate change, for example. This can be seen in particular in the trends toward drought and desertification that have resulted in increased internal migration and clashes between sedentary and nomadic sections of the population.

The Sahel's crises have uprooted more than 4 million people and millions more could be added to already record levels of global human migration as Africa's population grows and its climate continues to change<sup>10</sup>.

The Sahel crisis is one of the fastest-growing, yet most ignored crises in the world. About 34.5 million people there are

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**The Malian military seized power after a coup in August 2020.**  
AFP

in urgent need of humanitarian aid and more than 5.9 million have been displaced from their homes.

The region is facing a horrendous food crisis, with an estimated 16.7 million people experiencing critical levels of food insecurity. About 2.2 million children there are severely malnourished, and their education has also suffered; armed groups have directly attacked schools, and many displaced children no longer have access to schooling of any kind.

On the flip side, growing international concerns about migration, and in particular the weaponization of migration to Europe, mean that policymakers will take more interest in events in the Sahel and, perhaps, prioritize efforts to address them.

However, the scale of the challenge is huge. A 2022 study commissioned by the World Bank estimated that that “up to 13.5 million people across the Sahel could fall into poverty due to climate change-related shocks by 2050 if urgent climate adaptation measures are not taken<sup>11</sup>.”

All of these trends beget each other and reinforce cycles of worsening instability. Stabilization efforts have failed, increasing the volatility that military actors have used to justify coup actions taken against sitting governments. Conflict has spawned more conflict and further failures of governability, all culminating in

the chaos of the past few years.

Yet instability is not the only driver of coups. Take for example Niger, the largest country in West Africa, where the democratically elected president, Mohammed Bazoum, was overthrown in July this year by the very people who were supposed to protect and uphold his office, the presidential guards. The declared goal of the rebels was to “put an end to the regime due to the deteriorating security situation and bad governance<sup>12</sup>.”

Bazoum was the first elected leader to succeed another in Niger since the country gained independence in 1960. As recently as March this year, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken described the country as a “model of resilience, a model of democracy<sup>13</sup>.”

Therefore, we can see the factors that underpin coups are complex and go beyond the headline geopolitics of the day. Broad-brushstroke descriptions of the Sahel as the “coup belt of Africa” do not do justice to the variety of what the coups entail, as political-change events. Indeed, it is important to avoid the traditional clichés that lump African issues into uniform categories and lack the nuance of the unique nature of each event.

The truth is that coups vary enormously. There are revolutionary coups and continuity coups. Despite the basic definition





**French President Emmanuel Macron met with Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum at the Elysee Presidential Palace in Paris on Feb. 16, 2023. AFP**

of a coup being linked to military actors, the nature of those who commit the act can include various constituencies of military or civilian actors. In Mali, for example, there have been coups within coups<sup>14</sup>, to add further complexity to the mix.

Coups can be extremely violent or relatively peaceful, and research reveals that no African leader has been killed in a coup since 1999<sup>15</sup>. The same research found that coup attempts in the past decade have had a far higher success rate than those of previous decades. So although coups are becoming less frequent overall, they are also becoming more effective.

Coups that are less “revolutionary” in nature result in less depth of change within a country’s leadership and can sometimes appear to be more of an exercise in exiling or holding the previous leader hostage, rather than enacting serious political change.

## WHAT NEXT?

Although all coups are not the same and nor are they triggered by the same reasons and causes, as a phenomenon they are an important test for both the regional and international order.

Regionally, the so-called “coup belt” in Africa includes most of the Sahel countries, which are involved in confrontations with the Economic Community of West African States.

In September 2023, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, three West African Sahel nations ruled by military juntas, signed a security pact in which they pledged to come to the aid of each other in case of internal rebellion or external aggression<sup>16</sup>.

There is, of course, a strategic irony in those who came to power through armed rebellion committing to cooperate with each other in opposing it. But such a stance increases the stakes and raises the possibility of a regional conflagration.

Coups are also a testing ground for a new global order emerging in the shadow of a divided UN Security Council, and the bitter acrimony or studious neutrality coming out of the war in Ukraine.

Has the G5 Sahel, set up in 2014 to “guarantee conditions of development and security” for its five member states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger)<sup>17</sup>, run its course? The EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, seems to think so. He said that the €600 million (\$640 million) spent training security personnel in the Sahel had “failed to bolster democracy<sup>18</sup>.”

The coups in the region have prompted calls for the US to “reset” its strategy on Africa<sup>19</sup>. Will the EU, and others, look to cooperate or engage with coup governments on issues of international concern, such as counterterrorism efforts?

France seems ready to leave Niger to its fate. Macron has announced that his country will withdraw its ambassador from the country, along with the French troops that have been helping local forces battle Islamist militants. The French president has said he regards his overthrown and imprisoned counterpart, Bazoum, as Niger’s rightful leader, who was “targeted by this coup d’etat because he was carrying out courageous reforms, and because there was a largely ethnic settling of scores and a lot of political cowardice.”

Yet often the immediate steps in response to a coup are quietly rescinded once the new regime appears to have achieved some level of political stability.

The EU, for example, halted security collaboration with Niger and withheld planned financial assistance of €503 million between 2021 and 2024. But the country is a key participant in the strategically important uranium trade, responsible for about 5 percent of total global production.

Will pragmatic realism ultimately result in regional and international reengagement with Niger and other coup regimes? Will new allies provide the regimes with a fresh basis for their foreign policies? Or will an already fragile region simply become even more precarious and unpredictable?

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