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Webinar key takeaways: Challenges to constitutional rule in Africa



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Introduction

The African continent has been the scene for insurgencies, mass protests and creeping authoritarianism. This isn't a new phenomenon – of the 37 coups in the world since 1990, 29 were in Africa. But there is increasing instability: since August 2020, five coups and at least three attempts have been recorded.

Multiple armed groups and militias challenge state authority and legitimacy in various African states. Responses to these threats have failed to sustainably resolve them, and in some cases, state actions themselves may lie at the root of the problem.

In our recent webinar, 'Challenges to constitutional rule in Africa', members of Oxford Analytica's Expert Network explored the factors undermining state authority in Africa. The following details the highlights of the discussion.

What accounts for the growing challenges to state authority and legitimacy across Africa?

Africans are increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of their democracies. Polling data from agencies such as Afrobarometer show steady support for democracy as a principle. There is also evidence that democracy can deliver in the long-term – democracy in Cape Verde and Seychelles, for example, has consistently delivered desired stability.

However, elsewhere factors are combining to undermine democracy in Africa, giving coup leaders the opportunity to take unconstitutional action and further weakening political institutions. Our panellists considered the triggers for unrest:

1. There remain large portions of the continent where state authority is weak, with state performance in many countries not improving since the 1980s. Governments, in countries like Mali, Guinea and Zimbabwe, are nominally elected but then attempt to extend their term, or run low-quality elections, thereby undermining their legitimacy. This has led to mass protests against democratically elected governments and growing frustration with leaders in power.
Even in countries with fair elections, there is often very little meaningful democratic choice. In 'a choiceless democracy', popular dissatisfaction breeds opportunities for unscrupulous leaders or the military to take undemocratic actions.
2. Democracy cannot deliver change at the speed that the continent's younger population want to see (half are under 25 years old). This intensifies the strong mismatch between expectations and what democracy can offer, further challenging state authority.

3. COVID-19 has undermined economic growth. The pandemic's economic and social repercussions have been dramatic and have led to a significant and sudden increase in poverty and economic discontent. This has had a disruptive impact for all governments but has particularly increased risks of authoritarian reactions in countries where there was already a risk.
4. Coups beget coups: 41% of the African countries that have had a coup since 1990 have had a second one. The military in these countries is used to being in power, and political institutions are generally relatively weak. In Guinea, for example, President Alpha Condé was recently removed from power in a coup. He also came to power in an election following a coup. In this context, declining democratic legitimacy intertwines with a history of military rule and military intervention in politics.
5. Actions of outsiders in African politics, particularly those providing security assistance, play indirect roles in exacerbating instability in the political environment. Foreign financial aid often empowers security services that develop interests of their own that then continue to play an outsized role in the country's politics. In the past year alone, four out of the five coups -- and one attempt -- occurred in countries that are key to Western security interests and are major recipients of Western security aid.
There are discussions in Washington about reducing assistance given to the military in African countries that are in conflict or at least attaching more conditionalities to the aid.

Even though the region is prone to coups, there is no reason to think that every country across Africa is at risk; many have domestic political contexts that make coups quite unlikely, even if factors such as declining democracy or economic difficulty also affect those environments. Fewer historical coups and weaker military in countries like Mozambique and Ethiopia, for example, reduce the probability of coups here.

Which countries are at the greatest risk of coups in the medium term?

There is a set of countries that have been major recipients of international assistance, which has given the military a bigger seat at the cabinet than it had before. Niger, the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, countries in the Sahel region and potentially Zimbabwe are all at risk of coups. Cameroon is also potentially exposed, because of its ailing president and a military that is very unhappy with its current situation. And Rwanda where there is a powerful military and little clear answer as to what will happen after long-serving President Paul Kagame goes. The Democratic Republic of the Congo may also be at risk

given the potential power play between the current president and former President Joseph Kabila.

In addition, countries that have had a first coup since 1990 are at increased risk of more. This would include Algeria, Comoros, Chad, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho and Tunisia. Nigeria shares a history of coups since 1990, but the risk of unrest may be limited as from 2000, its military leadership has been integrated into civilian patronage networks to avoid such situations. So far, the strategy has worked.

In Sudan, meanwhile, the military seized power at the end of October 2021. If domestic pressure against the coup continues and is matched with increasing pressure from the international community (including withdrawal of support from the military), it could make a difference. But the military fears repercussions for crimes, which could drive resistance to a democratic transition.

Beyond Africa, there arguably has not been a sufficiently robust international condemnation and response to recent coups to deter would-be junta leaders from new attempts in areas at risk.



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