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CONTENT

- I Introduction 1
- II Theoretical Framework 2
- III African Military Coups – A Retrospective 3
- IV Factors Leading to a Coup 7
- V Why a Reemergence of Military Coups? 10
- VI Conclusion and Recommendations 18

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Political Fragility in Africa: Are Military Coups d'Etat a Never-Ending Phenomenon?

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I Introduction

The sudden overthrow of a democratically elected government in Mali in the spring of 2012 by a small group of military insurgents is symptomatic of the reemerging pattern of coups d'état which have hit Africa in recent years. So it happened that in March 2012, after enjoying twenty years of constitutional democracy, Mali briefly fell under the control of a group of middle-ranking soldiers. The country at the time was tragically divided between the Tuareg and Islamist rebel groups taking control of the North, and the joint junta-new civilian government struggling to unify the country. The coup in Mali was immediately met by international condemnation, sanctions imposed by its neighbors, and the loss of northern Mali to Tuareg forces. The coup proved short-lived: on April 6, the junta agreed with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) negotiators to step down in exchange for an end to sanctions, and handed back power to the transitional government led by Dioncounda Traoré.

Every coup d'état has different origins, causes and effects: in the case of the Mali, it principally reflected soldiers' grievances over the government's weak handling of the Tuareg-led rebellion in the northern part of

the country. But many other African countries have also succumbed to military forces over the past five years, including Mauritania (August 2008), Guinea (December 2008), Guinea-Bissau (December 2008 and April 2012), and Niger (February 2010). This poses a number of questions: What makes Africa such a volatile region and what sociopolitical conditions nurture the seedbed of dissent? Is there a discernible pattern of events that could help predict when military coups are most likely to occur? And, most importantly, are there any measures that governments could take to mitigate this risk?

Since the years of independence, Africa has experienced more than 200 military coups, counting both successful and failed coup attempts. The political and economic conditions prevailing in different African countries and the foreign influences at work during different periods (post-independence, Cold War, and post-Cold War eras) have all played a part in fueling conflicts and coups in the region. The destabilizing factors have been many and varied, depending on the national context: warring factions seeking to gain power in the aftermath of independence; established and stable states burdened by poor quality of

* Disclaimer: The views and interpretations in this brief are those of the authors and do not represent the position and opinions of the African Development Bank.

governance and by corrupt officials; autocratic regimes repressing any form of opposition but with sociopolitical discontent and instability seething below the surface. Our analysis though will focus on other underlying factors. For example, pervasive and persistently low levels of economic growth, associated with high levels of poverty, are symptomatic of the social grievances that may precipitate military coups in African countries. Furthermore, foreign powers' quest for geostrategic influence and security, has in the past translated into shadow participation in African inter- and intrastate conflicts and in support to African dictators, thereby fanning the flames of violent dissent.

Building upon earlier analytical work on military coups, this paper pays particular attention to the recent reemergence of military coups in Africa and their underlying causes. While researchers have differed over the precise factors leading to coups and the level of their predictability, this paper shifts the focus to political and economic determinants, which have hitherto escaped in-depth analysis – such as limited economic growth, low income levels, and a lack of democratic institutions. In so doing, the paper seeks to shed light on the predictability of military coups and to propose some broad recommendations that could help to reduce their occurrence.

II Theoretical Framework

Several researchers have analyzed political conflict and the causes and outcomes of military coups d'état. Early work by Jackman (1978)¹ attributed the coups d'état that took place in the new states of Africa from 1960 to 1975 to three broad reasons, namely social mobilization or "modernization"; cultural pluralism; and political factors (i.e. political party systems and mass participation). According to Jackman, both social mobilization and the presence of a dominant ethnic group had destabilizing consequences for newly established states in sub-Saharan Africa. He further argued that a multiplicity of political parties can be destabilizing, whereas single-party dominance has had a stabilizing effect on post-independence governments. However, when in interaction with electoral turnout (political mobilization), Jackman found both multipartyism and the dominant ethnic group to have destabilizing effects.

Drawing on Jackman's earlier analysis, Johnson, Slater, and McGowan (1984)² found that "states with relatively dynamic economies whose societies were not very socially mobilized before independence and which have maintained or restored some degree of political participation and political pluralism have experienced fewer military coups, attempted coups, and coup plots than have states with the opposite set of

characteristics." In other words, they concluded that some measures of positive economic performance are highly stabilizing, such as a high level of productive employment, robust economic growth, sound export performance (ratio of export-imports to GNP), and diversified commodity exports.

In attempting to analyze the internal factors leading to a coup, McBride (2004)³ and Collier and Hoeffler (2007)⁴ focused their analyses on the military itself. According to McBride, the military intervenes in political affairs mainly for reasons of personal greed, being motivated by the "rents" they hope to extract once they gain power or control over the state. Collier and Hoeffler have highlighted the interdependence between the risks of a coup (plotted, attempted, or successful) and the level of military spending at the time. They found that in countries with a low coup risk, governments respond by reducing military spending, whereas in countries with a high coup risk, governments tend to increase military spending.

Another theory focuses on the colonial heritage of African countries, namely the disparate political systems inherited from Britain, France, and Portugal. While Luckham (2001)⁵ and Coleman and Brice (1962)⁶ argue in favor of this theory, both Wells (1974)⁷ and Tardoff (1993)⁸ claim that the evidence does not support this thesis.⁹ Souaré

¹ Jackman, Robert W. (1978). "The Predictability of Coups d'Etat: A Model with African Data." *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 72, (December), pp. 1262-1275.

² Johnson, Thomas H., Slater, Robert O., and McGowan, Pat (1984). "Explaining African Military Coups d'état, 1960-1982." *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78, No. 3, pp. 622-640.

³ McBride, Michael (2004). "Crises, Coups, and Entry-deterring Reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa." Paper presented at the Public Choice Society Seminar at the University of California, June.

⁴ Collier, Paul and Hoeffler, Anke (2007). "Military Spending and the Risks of Coups d'Etat." Centre for the Study of African Economies. Oxford: Oxford University. October.

⁵ Luckham, Robin et al. (2001). "Conflict and Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Assessment of the Issues and Evidence." IDS Working Paper No. 128. Brighton, Sussex: Institute of Development Issues.

⁶ Coleman, James, and Belmont Brice, Jr. (1962). "The Role of the Military in sub-Saharan Africa." Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁷ Wells, Alan (1974). "The Coup in Theory and Practice: Independent Black Africa in the 1960s." *American Journal of Sociology*, no. 79.

⁸ Tardoff, William (1993). "Government and Politics in Africa." 2nd edn. London: Macmillan.

⁹ Cited in Souaré, Issaka K. (2006). "Civil Wars and Coups d'Etat in West Africa." Lanham, MD: University Press of America, p. 96.

¹⁰ Ibid.

(2006)¹⁰ has pointed out that the two West African countries most affected by successful coups (Nigeria and Niger) had in fact very different colonial pasts. And while Cape Verde has been coup-free, Guinea-Bissau – the other Portuguese colony in West Africa – has experienced three successful coups. Souaré's argument is supported by the fact that Liberia and Ethiopia, which were never colonies, have both witnessed military coups.

The approach in this paper will build upon some of this analysis, while identifying new factors that have not yet been fully analyzed, such as a country's level of socio-political and economic development. Based on an analysis of recent coups in established democratic regimes, it will reveal the weakness of democratic institutions in some African countries and the part that this can play in triggering military coups.

III African Military Coups – A Retrospective

A coup d'état is a sudden (lasting from a few hours to at least one week), often violent overthrow of a government by a small group of military, police, or security forces. It results in the illegal replacement of the existing government personnel or constitutional relationships, and may radically alter the state's fundamental social and economic policies. If the small group's struggle to depose the established government fails (which generally takes no longer than a week), it is considered an attempted intervention or "coup attempt." Another form of extra-legal military or paramilitary infiltration in political affairs is called a "plot." In such a case, the population only finds out about it later on, from announcements by the legitimate government that a plot has been uncovered and prevented.

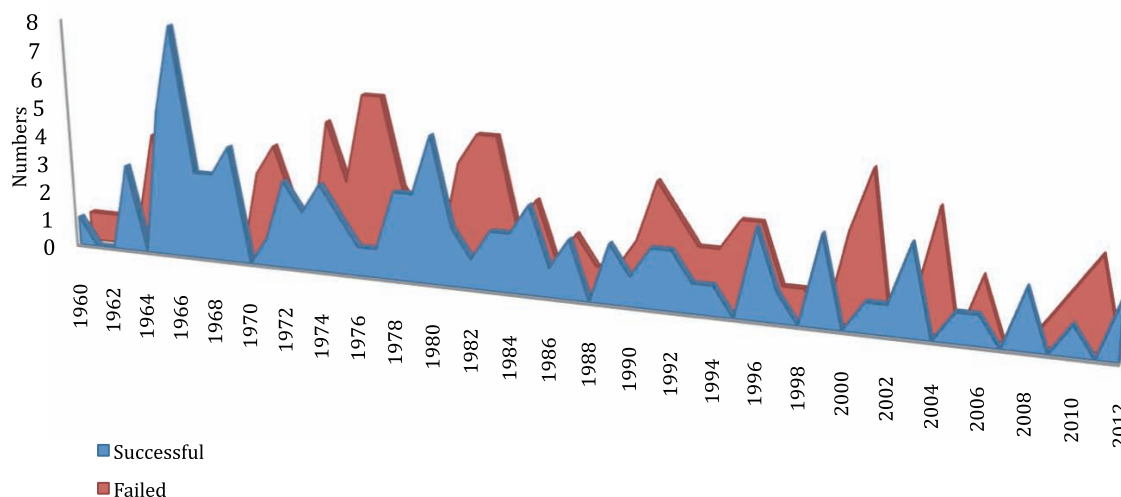
In Africa, more than 200 military coups have been staged since the post-independence era of 1960s, with 45% of them being successful and resulting in a change in power at the top, i.e. the displacement of the head-of-state and government officials, and/or the dissolution of previously existing constitutional structures. Of the 51 African states selected in our sample, only 10 countries have never experienced a coup d'état (successful, attempted, or plotted), namely: Botswana, Cape Verde, Egypt, Eritrea, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Namibia, South Africa, and Tunisia.¹¹ In the past 52 years, 80% of the selected countries have experienced at least one coup or failed coup attempt, and 61% have suffered several military coups (ranging from 2 to 10 in number). Table 1 and Figure 1 below present the annual numbers of successful coups and coup attempts that took place in Africa between 1960 and early 2012.

¹¹ The revolts and protests that started in Tunisia in December 2010 (known as the "The Arab Spring") resulted in the removal of the heads of state and in changes in the governments of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. However, these events are considered to be "revolutions," as they were initiated through popular uprisings and motivated primarily by demands for basic social, economic, and political change.

Table 1 Number and Type of Military Coups in African Countries, 1960-2012

Year	Successful	Failed/Attempt
1960	1 (DRC)	1 (Ethiopia)
1961		1 (Somalia)
1962		1 (Senegal)
1963	3 (Togo, Congo, Benin)	1 (DRC)
1964		4 (Ghana, Tanzania, Gabon, DRC)
1965	5 (Benin, Algeria, DRC, Benin, Benin)	1 (Burundi)
1966	8 (CAR, Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Nigeria, Burundi)	2 (Togo, Sudan)
1967	3 (Togo, Sierra Leone, Benin)	1 (Ghana)
1968	3 (Sierra Leone, Congo, Mali)	
1969	4 (Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Benin)	
1970		3 (Congo, Togo, Guinea)
1971	1 (Uganda)	4 (Sierra Leone, Uganda, Sudan, Chad)
1972	3 (Ghana, Madagascar, Benin)	2 (Congo, Benin)
1973	2 (Swaziland, Rwanda)	1 (Cote d'Ivoire)
1974	3 (Burkina Faso, Niger, Ethiopia)	5 (Uganda, Uganda, Angola, CAR, Madagascar)
1975	2 (Chad, Nigeria)	3 (Benin, Sudan, Mozambique)
1976	1 (Burundi)	6 (CAR, Nigeria, Niger, Uganda, Mali, Sudan)
1977	1 (Seychelles)	6 (Benin, Sudan, Congo, Chad, Angola, Uganda)
1978	3 (Comoros, Ghana, Mauritania)	3 (Mali, Somalia, Sudan)
1979	3 (Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, CAR)	2 (Chad, Ghana)
1980	5 (Mauritania, Liberia, Uganda, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso)	1 (Zambia)
1981	2 (CAR, Ghana)	4 (Mauritania, Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Gambia)
1982	1 (Burkina Faso)	5 (Mauritania, CAR, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Ghana)
1983	2 (Burkina Faso, Nigeria)	5 (Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Ghana, Cameroon, Niger)
1984	2 (Guinea, Mauritania)	2 (Ghana, Cameroon)
1985	3 (Sudan, Uganda, Nigeria)	3 (Liberia, Guinea, Liberia)
1986	1 (Lesotho)	1 (Equatorial Guinea)
1987	2 (Burundi, Burkina Faso)	2 (Sierra Leone, Comoros)
1988		1 (Uganda)
1989	2 (Sudan, Comoros)	1 (Ethiopia)
1990	1 (Chad)	2 (Nigeria, Zambia)
1991	2 (Mali, Lesotho)	4 (Djibouti, Togo, Chad, Togo)
1992	2 (Sierra Leone, Algeria)	3 (Burundi, Benin, Comoros)
1993	1 (Nigeria)	2 (Guinea Bissau, Burundi)
1994	1 (Gambia)	2 (Burundi, Liberia)
1995		3 (Sao Tome & Principe, Comoros, Sierra Leone)
1996	3 (Sierra Leone, Niger, Burundi)	3 (Guinea, CAR, Sierra Leone)
1997	1 (Sierra Leone)	1 (Zambia)
1998		1 (Guinea Bissau)
1999	3 (Niger, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire)	
2000		3 (Comoros, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire)
2001	1 (DRC)	5 (Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi, CAR, Burundi, Comoros)
2002	1 (Cote d'Ivoire)	
2003	3 (CAR, Sao Tome & Principe, Guinea-Bissau)	1 (Mauritania)
2004		4 (DRC, Chad, DRC, Equatorial Guinea)
2005	1 (Mauritania)	
2006	1 (Chad)	2 (Madagascar, Cote d'Ivoire)
2008	2 (Mauritania, Guinea)	
2009		1 (Madagascar)
2010	1 (Niger)	2 (Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar)
2011		3 (DRC, Niger, Guinea-Bissau)
2012	2 (Mali, Guinea-Bissau)	

Figure 1 Trends in African Military Coups, 1960-2012



Source: AfDB, based on various sources.

While a significant number of successful coups occurred in the immediate post-independence era (during the 1960s), the 1970s and 1980s were marked by a plethora of both successful and failed coup attempts. Of the 39 coups that happened during the 1960s, 27 (or 69%) resulted in the successful toppling of established regimes. The rise in the failure rate of military coups (61%) during the 1970s and

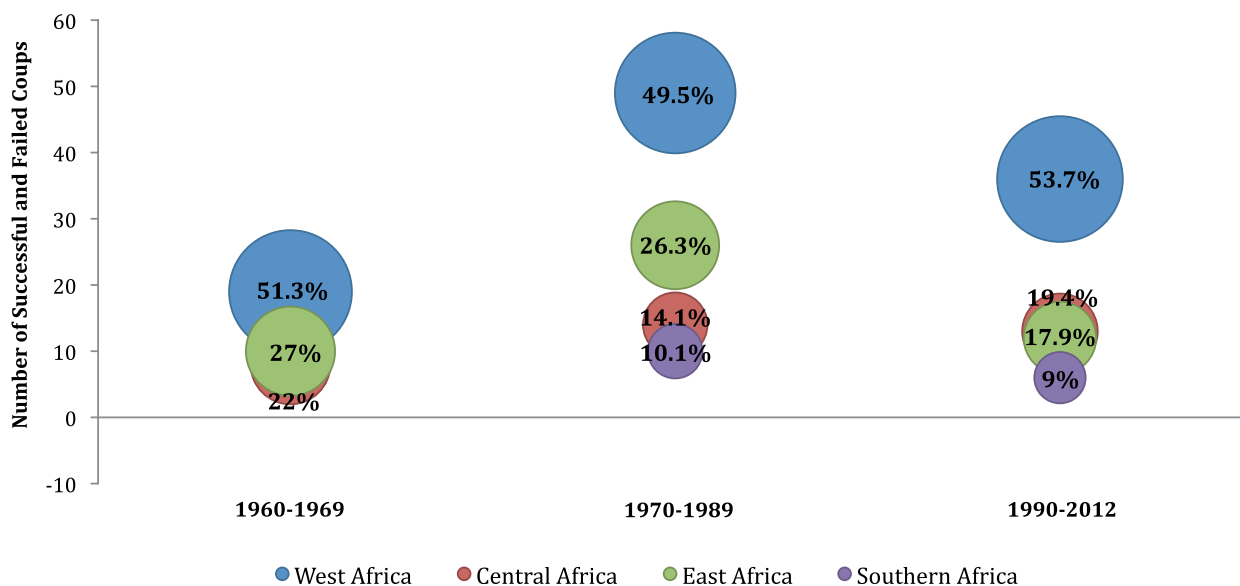
1980s can be largely attributed to the fact that most African nations had been independent for a considerable period of time. This allowed them to have established political systems in place, able to successfully withstand military coup attempts. The 1990s and 2000s, on the other hand, witnessed a decrease in the number of both successful and failed coups, with about half of African countries being coup free. The

reasons for the absence of coups and coup attempts during this period are manifold, ranging from foreign powers guaranteeing stability in some countries, to other nations being caught up in different manifestations of political violence (e.g. civil or interstate wars), or to established regimes being equipped with measures of systemic legitimacy that discouraged praetorian assaults from the armed forces.

Table 2 Number of Military Coups (successful and attempted) per Sub-region

	1960-1969	1970-1989	1990-2010
West Africa	19	49	36
Central Africa	8	14	13
Eastern Africa	10	26	12
Southern Africa	0	10	6
TOTAL	37	99	67

Figure 2 Sub-regional Share of Military Coups: 1960-1969; 1970-1989; 1990-2012



Source: AfDB, based on list of coups d'état in Africa 1961-2012.

Drawing comparisons between Sub-Saharan Africa's sub-regions bolsters the argument for correlation between the incidence of coups and the growth level in sub-regional political economies.¹² The West Africa sub-region, comprising 17 states, records the highest rate of coup activity (see Figure 2). This sub-region alone experienced 104 military coups, which is about half of all reported coups in Africa. The Central Africa and Eastern Africa sub-regions experienced respectively 35 and 48 military coups. While both of these sub-regions endured similar trends, the

Central African countries experienced more successful coups compared to East African nations. Many have attributed the high prevalence of successful coups in West and Central Africa sub-regions to a 'coup contagion' phenomenon. A risk of contagion in West and Central Africa may have influenced the success rate of military coups in these two sub-regions. As the occurrence of military coups in one country heightens the likelihood of military coups in other countries in the sub-region¹³, it has been argued that the success of a coup in one country similarly influences the

outcome of military coups in neighboring countries.

With regard to the Southern Africa sub-region, which enjoys greater stability, only 15 coups have been registered since independence. The presence of South Africa in this sub-region had a significant influence on the reduced incidence of military coups d'état. As a powerful economic and political regime, South Africa's pronounced intervention in the domestic affairs of its neighboring nations created strong disincentives for coup behaviors.

¹² For the purpose of this paper, the North Africa subregion (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia) will be excluded from the geographical comparative analysis. Our classification of subregional groupings include: West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo); Central Africa (Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Gabon); East Africa (Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda); and Southern Africa (Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe).

¹³ Li, Richard P.Y. and Thompson, William R. (1975). "The 'Coup Contagion' Hypothesis." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 19, No. 1, March 1975, pp. 63-88.

IV Factors Leading to a Coup

The military coup events during the post-independence, Cold War and post-Cold War eras were relatively peaceful and did not involve heavy violence or casualties (unlike civil wars or intra- and interstate wars). As Ruth First famously wrote: “Get the keys to the armory; turn out the barracks; take the radio station, the post office and the airport; [and] arrest the person of the president and you arrest the state...”¹⁴. But in order to unlock the underlying factors behind military coups and the reasons for Africa’s political fragility, we need to look more closely at some under-researched areas. This brings us to highlight the ideological and foreign dimensions of these coups, especially during the post-colonial and Cold War periods.

Some of the military coups during the early years of independence were inspired by ideological motivations. The desire to radically change the social base of their countries away from status-ridden oligarchies to embrace democracy and the rule of law induced some military leaders to intervene in political affairs. A notable example is Captain Thomas Sankara, who led a coup d’état in Burkina Faso in 1983 with the clear desire to establish a just, reformed, and prosperous society. Subsequently, the bipolar struggle between competing ideologies during the Cold War era heightened political tensions and scaled up military conflicts in newly independent African states. Indeed, the battle between the two “su-

perpowers” (the United States and the Soviet Union) for increased diplomatic, military, and economic spheres of influence further undermined the fragile and complex sociopolitical structures of many African states. Given the weak institutional and productive capacities of the majority of African countries at that time, these “superpowers” were able to influence governments toward “military Keynesianism” and its attribute of increased military spending. As many African leaders engaged in military adventures simply to divert attention away from failed domestic policies, the level of political conflicts escalated sharply.

The soaring military spending in Africa in the 1970s (estimated at 6.6% a year) was accompanied by widespread corruption within the army and the military regimes and by increasing social inequality. These elements combined to fuel most of the military coups (about 100 between 1970-1990) that African countries experienced during the Cold War era.

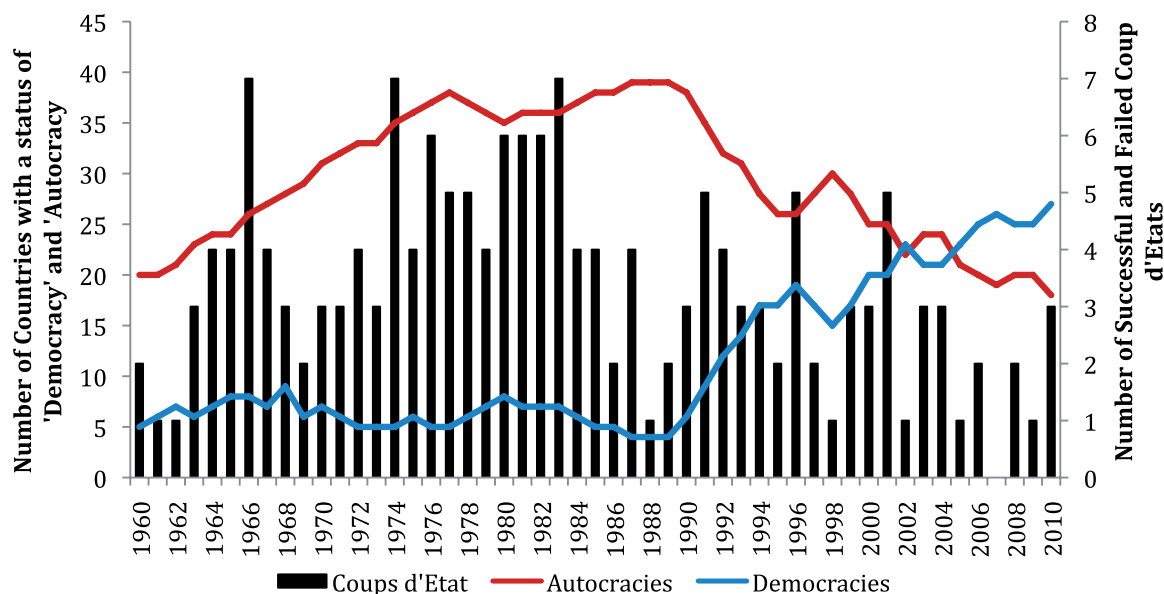
It is worth noting that, in most cases, military coups occurred in countries where the sociopolitical environment was most conducive to their emergence. A government’s inability to design, implement, and administer sound public policy – in conjunction with other economic and political weaknesses, such as low economic growth, corruption, and lack of institutionalized democratic structures – motivated soldiers and rebels to take full advantage of the situation and overthrow political leaders with the goal of pursuing corporate or personal interests. With very few ex-

ceptions (e.g. Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings in Ghana, 1979; and Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré in Mali, 1991), military coup leaders have generally failed to honor their pledges to restore sociopolitical stability and hand over power to the civilians.

Upon gaining their independence, many African countries struggled to institute a modern and democratic state structure. Instead, they ended up establishing autocratic regimes with elite groups that abused state authority to enrich their constituencies and consolidate their dominance in the political process. In the early 1960s, only eight Sub-Saharan Africa countries had democratic regimes, while 23 emerged as autocratic. The end of the Cold War provided the impetus for a radical change in the prevalent regimes in Africa, whereby many countries progressively moved away from autocracy toward democratic systems of government. This move was positively correlated with a reduction in social unrest and political violence in many countries. However, in a few countries the sudden regime transition triggered more political violence and armed conflicts, as experienced in the Central Africa Republic, Comoros, Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, and Sierra Leone during the 1990s. Figure 3 gives a regional overview of the pattern of military coups and the typology of political regimes in Africa for the 50-year period 1960-2010. The chart reveals a positive correlation between political instability and the occurrence of military coups and attempted coups in sub-Saharan Africa.

¹⁴ D. Pinnock (1997) “Voices of Liberation.” Volume 2: Ruth First. Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, p. 188.

Figure 3 Regime Types and Coups d'Etat in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1960-2010



Source: AfDB, based on the Polity IV Project dataset, Center for Systemic Peace.

However, it should be borne in mind that the incidence of military coups is not restricted to countries governed by autocratic regimes. Some countries with democratically elected civilian governments have suffered a similar fate. An interesting example is The Gambia, which experienced its first successful coup d'état in 1994, challenging a 30-year old multiparty democratic regime.

Indeed, it would be naïve to argue that a move toward 'democracy,' to give ordinary people a greater say in the decision-making that affects their lives, will automatically prevent military coups. The evidence we have presented in this paper contradicts this hypothesis. What needs to be taken into account in any analysis of the causative factors behind military coups is the complexity of the underlying determinants. In addition to problems of poor governance

and institutional inefficiencies, political factionalism, and widespread corruption, many African economies continue to suffer from deep-rooted fragility. This exposes African states to greater pressures from the army and civil society. In fact, the end of the Cold War and the rise of the United States as the major hegemonic power significantly reduced the flows of credits and loans to African governments. Meanwhile, the failure of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) implemented by International Financial Institutions (IMF and World Bank) in the 1980s, and the recalling of their loans further indebted African governments. As a result, many African economies ran up chronic balance of payment deficits and were unable to finance their patron-client networks. All this contributed to rampant unemployment, collapsing infrastructure, deteriorating economic situations, and an

erosion of political stability. As social movements started to challenge the state hegemony in the midst of all these crises, the military once more took advantage of the situation and sought political power.

This is where Johnson et al.'s argument for a linkage between per capita GDP growth and the incidence of military coups starts to gain traction.¹⁵ By replicating and extending Jackman's (1978) model of the structural determinants of coups d'état in Sub-Saharan Africa, Johnson et al. discovered, in addition to political pluralism, other important explanatory variables, namely domestic and international economic performance. Citing Wallerstein, they further concluded that:

"...in states where influentials have internalized the rules of the capitalist

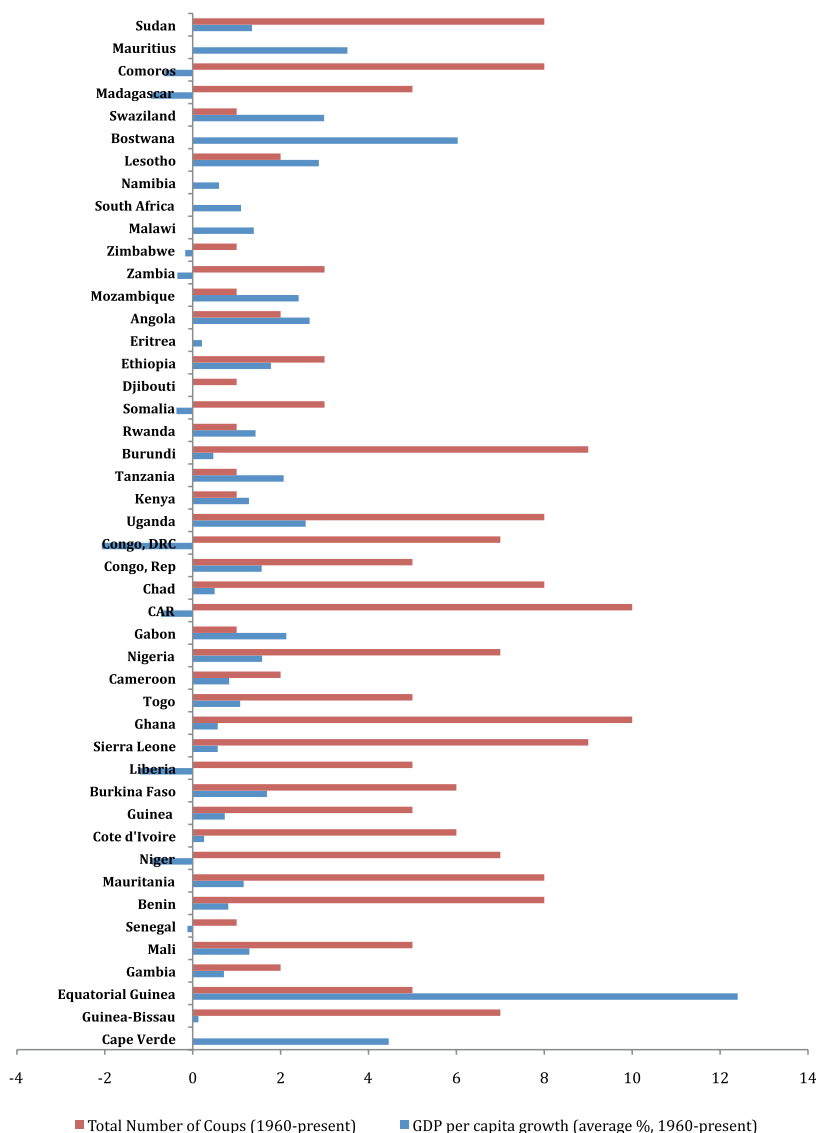
¹⁵ Johnson, Thomas H., Slater, Robert O., and McGowan, Pat (1984). "Explaining African Military Coups d'état, 1960-1982." *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78, No. 3, pp. 622-640.

world economy and thereby coped relatively well with the very harsh international economic environment of the last 10 years, these states have lessened their peripherality to a degree, strengthened their civilian structure somewhat, and experienced less military interventionism than states whose influentials have not coped as well.”¹⁶

In Figure 4, we observe that Sub-Saharan African countries with low, or negative, per capita GDP growth since independence have experienced more military coups than countries with higher per capita GDP growth rates. Outstanding examples include Burundi, the Central African Republic, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana,

Guinea-Bissau, Niger, and Sierra Leone, among others. Some exceptions such as Equatorial Guinea, which has averaged a GDP per capita growth of 12.4% but experienced five military coups (one successful and four attempts), bring into focus other dimensions of economic and political stability that should be further explored.

Figure 4 GDP per Capita Growth and Number of Military Coups (successful and attempted) in selected Sub-Saharan African countries, 1960-2012



Source: AfDB, based on the Polity IV Project dataset, Center for Systemic Peace.

¹⁶ Wallerstein (1979). Cited in Johnson et al., op. cit., p. 636.

V Why a Reemergence of Military Coups?

The previous sections, which were devoted to the trends and causes of military coups in Africa, have provided a general overview of successful and failed military coups triggered mainly by ideological motives. We have drawn linkages between such coups and factors related to nationalism and the Cold War, political instability, and economic performance. While the prevalence of military coups increased significantly during the 1970s and 1980s, they faded considerably between the mid-1990s and 2000s. This has been attributed mostly to the progress made by many African countries in improving governance and reforming their economies. In fact, the 1990s witnessed the most significant spread of democratization across Africa. The winds of political change that swept through the continent resulted in many African countries for the first time seeing the emergence of a free press, multipartism, independent unions, and a variety of civil society organizations. In 2000, Africa entered the new millennium with over 30 member countries having already held their first free and fair multiparty elections. According to a McKinsey report,¹⁷ Africa's real GDP rose by 4.9% a year from 2000 through to 2008, more than twice the rate of growth in the 1980s and 1990s. After more than 50 years of independence, African countries have undergone radical political transformations – many are now democracies; and their vibrant economies make them one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. Yet, some have fallen back into the trap of

political instability characterized by the reemergence of military coups d'état.

Has the revamped and more open political environment effectively reduced the occurrence of military coups? What has been the impact of democratization on African economies? And more specifically, has there been a correlation (positive or negative) between the process of political change and economic transformation in African countries? It is important to try to shed light on the root causes of military coups in states that were considered to be politically stable at the time, since they enjoyed reasonably sound economic policies and reasonable levels of growth.

The Republic of Mali in the West African region has been exemplified as a state that transitioned successfully from autocracy to democratic governance in the early 1990s, and which has progressively achieved and sustained good levels of economic growth. But, as we have already highlighted, it shockingly lost that distinction in March 2012, when middle-ranking soldiers in revolt against the resurgent Tuareg rebels stormed the presidential palace, captured the state television station, announced that the Constitution had been suspended, and banished President Amadou Toumani Touré just a few weeks before the end of his second term.

Other examples abound. Two years prior to that, on February 18, 2010, the democratically elected President of Niger, Mamadou Tanja, was overthrown in a military coup. This was a reaction to the President's decision to

revise the Constitution in order to extend by three years his second five-year term. To cite another example: on August 6, 2008, Mauritania's first freely elected President, Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, was overthrown by a group of senior military officers who declared that their action was in response to the deteriorating social, economic, and security situation in the country. In December 2006, an alleged military coup attempt failed against Madagascar's democratically elected President, Marc Ravalomanana, who was running for re-election. But two years later (in March 2008), President Ravalomanana was forced to resign following a protracted power struggle with the opposition.

While all these countries have experienced more than one military coup d'état or attempted coup since their independence (as has been the case for many other African countries), the striking point of commonality is that they all enjoyed some measure of political stability and positive economic growth at the time of the coups. During the past decade, military coups d'état or coups attempts have taken place in 15 Sub-Saharan African countries, namely Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Sierra Leone. Our challenge is to discover why coups d'état or attempted coups have reemerged in democratic countries such as Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

¹⁷ McKinsey Quarterly. "What's Driving Africa's Growth?" June 2010. McKinsey Global Institute.

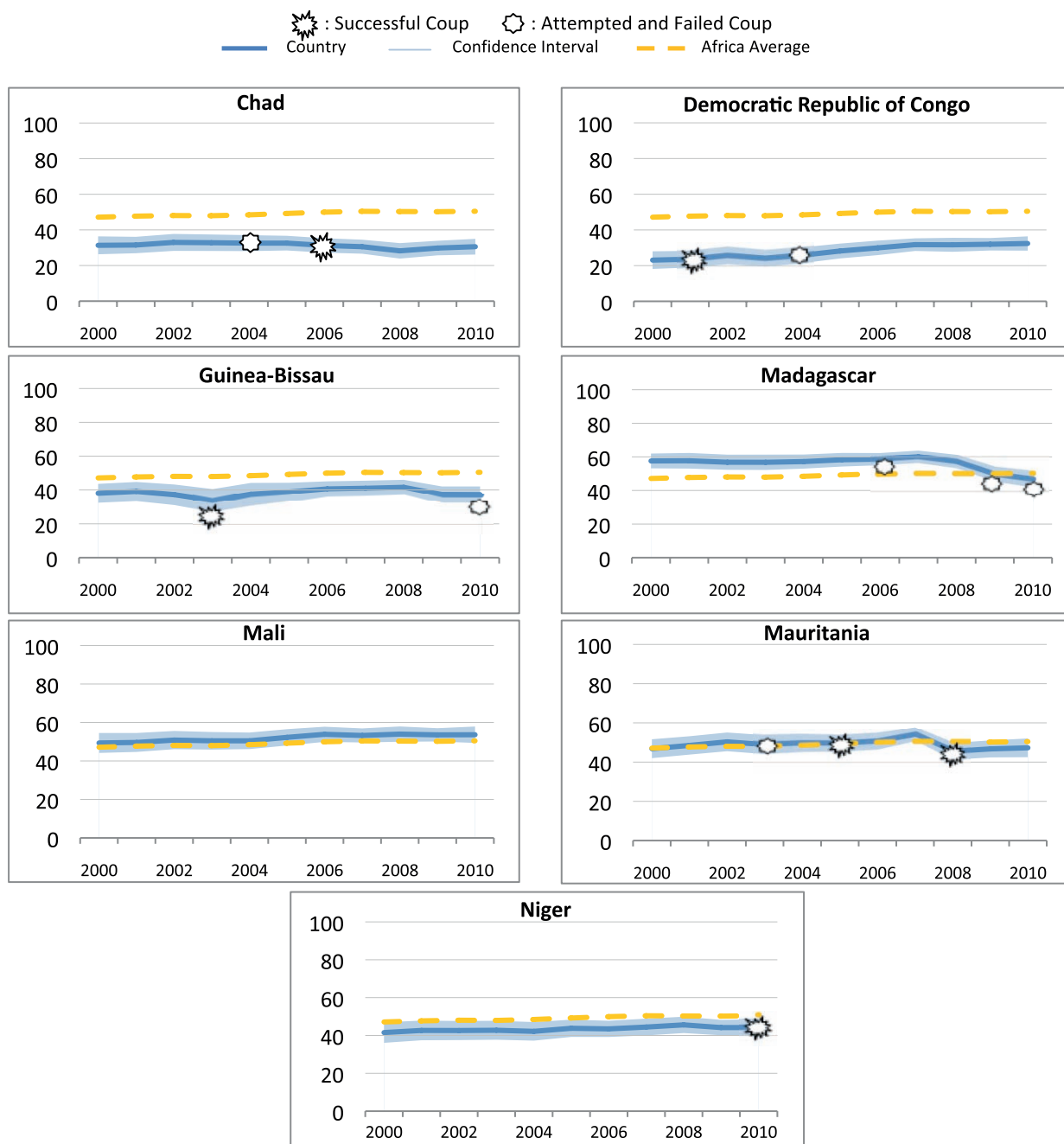
A careful analysis of the governance performance in these countries should help us determine whether there is any linkage with the prevalence or risk of military coups. Figure 5 charts each country's annual score in overall governance quality from 2000 to 2010 (based on the Ibrahim Index of African Governance¹⁸), as well as the military coups (successful or attempted) that occurred in the country for given year. While Mali and Madagascar slightly outperformed the average of all African countries for governance, all the other countries performed below average between 2000 and 2010. The Democratic Republic of Congo is the only

country that shows some significant improvement in overall governance quality. In Chad (2006), Guinea-Bissau (2003), Madagascar (2009), and Mauritania (2008), the occurrence of military coups coincides with an overall decline in governance performance. Although one cannot unequivocally claim that a country's declining score or poor quality of governance was a decisive factor leading to a coup, yet it is possible to discern some relationship. It is worth noting that in all these countries, military coups or coups attempts took place in the year during which their respective scores for Safety and Rule of Law and/or Participation

and Human Rights decreased significantly. The Safety and Rule of Law dimension of the Ibrahim Index assesses a state's ability to provide its citizens with an effective judicial system, and the "right to safety (rather than the mere presence of safety), accountability of public officials, and prevention, control and elimination of corruption in the country". With regard to the Participation and Human Rights dimension, it is "the right to vote, the right to a fair election, and freedom to express views on political issues and to hold government accountable for commitments made under national and international law" that are assessed.

¹⁸ The Ibrahim Index of African Governance is a composite index, combining underlying indicators in a standardized way to provide a statistical measure of governance performance in all African countries. It is constructed through four overarching dimensions: Safety and Rule of Law, Participation and Human Rights, Sustainable Economic Opportunity, and Human Development.

Figure 5 Overall Governance Trend and Military Coups d'Etat



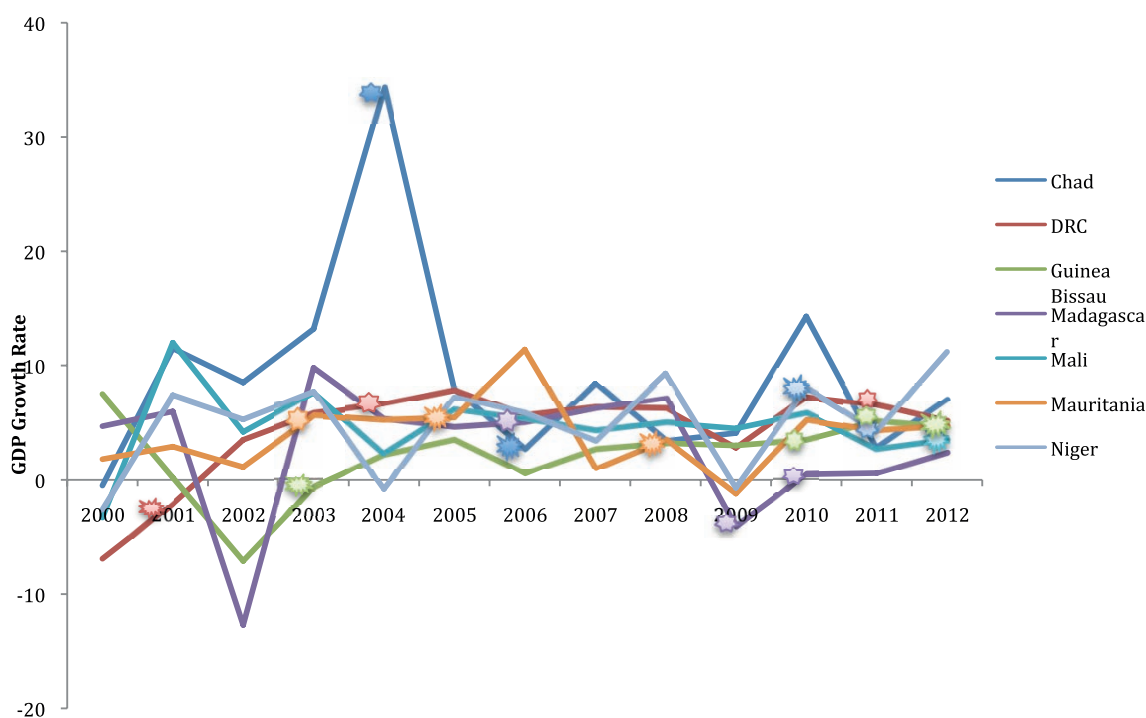
Source: AfDB, 2011 Ibrahim Index of African Governance.

Figure 6 provides the selected countries' GDP growth performance in conjunction with their incidence of military coups during 2000-2012. The very low performers in terms of real GDP (average growth rate from 2000 to 2012) are Guinea-Bissau (2.2%), Madagascar (2.7%), and Mauritania (3.9%), and all these countries experienced more than one military coup and attempted coup during 2000-2012 (four in Guinea-Bissau and three each in Madagascar and Mauritania).

Notwithstanding, Niger and Chad, which registered high GDP growth rates on average (5% and 9% respectively) also experienced more than one military coup and attempted coup (3 and 2 respectively). One interesting finding from Figure 6 is that, in some instances, successful military coups occurred a year or two following a decline in GDP growth rate. For instance, in Guinea-Bissau, a successful military coup took place in 2003, a year after the country experienced a recession

with a GDP rate of -7.1% in 2002. Similarly, in Chad, Mauritania, and Niger, military coups succeeded respectively in 2006, 2008, and 2010, following a year of declining GDP growth rate or very poor economic performance. Perhaps also relevant is the fact that their economies are undiversified, and essentially based on the agricultural sector and the extractive industries. That context could help create the linkage between economic vulnerability and political instability.

Figure 6 GDP Growth Rate (annual percentage) and Military Coups d'état



Source: AfDB Statistics.

What conclusions can we safely draw from Figures 5 and 6? We have seen a correlation between on the one hand, a decline in scores for governance quality (i.e. Safety and Rule of Law and Participation and Human Rights) and poor economic performance and, on the other, the later occurrence of a military coup or attempted coup. This raises a number of questions: How successful is the process of democratization in those countries? What should be done to improve good governance in those vulnerable states? What economic factors increase the risk of military coups?

While most African countries embarked on the path of democracy by establishing multiparty systems of governance, many are still struggling to ensure respect for human rights, security and peace, good governance, and political stability for their citizens. The apparent difficulty lies within countries' capacity to build integrated and harmonious democratic societies, where all aspects of the concept of democracy are fully mainstreamed. Although there is no universally accepted definition of "democracy," one that is widely endorsed is: "the ability of a people (the electorate) to choose freely on a regular basis between competing groups of potential governors to conduct the affairs of the state."¹⁹ In most of Africa, the transition to multiparty competitive elections has been a relatively smooth one. However, other aspects of democratic change, such as the institutiona-

lization of state structures that respect citizens' social and political rights, and that foster political and economic transparency and accountability, have yet to take root in many African countries.

An important factor that has hampered the prospects for democratic consolidation in Africa is the low level of socioeconomic development. According to Clark (2002)²⁰ and Bratton and van de Walle (1997),²¹ African states that experience poor economic growth and high inflation are likely to experience democratic transitions but are unlikely to consolidate democratic systems. Clark further argues that "all of the 'unconsolidated' transitional democracies have shown signs of great fragility, including serious outbreaks of public unrest and contested elections."²² This is the case in our sample countries, where post-transitional elections encountered serious flaws, such as contested electoral results (e.g. Mali in 2002), a return to military dictatorship (e.g. Madagascar in 1997), or civil war (e.g. Guinea-Bissau and Niger). Thus, it appears that their democratic experiments remain extremely fragile. Meanwhile, their economic performance has been hit by commodity fluctuations in world markets and other external shocks (e.g. natural disasters), low human and institutional capacity, and a high level of corruption. The heavy dependence on primary commodity exports (agriculture, mineral and petroleum exports) significantly reduces the potential for democratic consolidation.

The internal patterns of governance in those sample countries, characterized by a corrupt political class that manages economic revenues and suppresses the prospect for other economic activities to succeed, have failed to support democratic consolidation. This suggests that some socioeconomic variables, such as strong and sustainable economic growth, increases in levels of education, opportunities for competitiveness and financial reward, and an uncorrupted middle class, are prerequisites for the long-term political stability in African states.

VI Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, we have briefly analyzed the prevalence and root causes of military coups d'état that have occurred in African countries since the years of independence (1960s). We have shown that most military coups, both successful and failed, occurred in West African countries, and to a lesser degree, in Central and East African countries. The Southern African sub-region, which has enjoyed greater political stability, has also experienced fewer military coups. We argued that during the post-colonial and Cold War eras of the 1970s and 1980s, most of the military coups or attempted coups were motivated by ideological belief systems such as socialism, capitalism, free market and mixed economy orientations. Our analysis of coups d'état du-

¹⁹ Zack-Williams, A.B. (Jun. 2001). "No Democracy, No Development: Reflections on Democracy and Development in Africa." *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 28, No. 88, "Africa's Future: That Sinking Feeling", pp. 213-223

²⁰ Clark, John F. (2002). "Resource Revenues and Political Development in sub-Saharan Africa: Congo Republic in Perspective." *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 25-41.

²¹ Bratton, Michael and van de Walle, Nicolas (1997). "Democratic Experiments in Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press."

²² Clark, John F. (2005) "Petroleum Revenues and Political Development in the Congo Republic: The Democratic Experiment and Beyond." In Matthias Basedau and Andreas Mehler (eds.), *Resource Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Hamburg: Institut für Afrika Kunde, p. 125.

ring the 1990s and 2000s shifted attention to a number of internal and external factors, namely the quality of governance, economic performance, the standards of living, respect for human rights, and the degree of liberalization and integration within the region.

At the dawn of independence, a minority of African economies found themselves in the ascendant. Countries such as Ghana and Kenya enjoyed higher GDP growth rates than counterpart countries in Latin America and Asia. However, the majority of African states emerged relatively weak at the time of their independence, with new governments struggling to ensure political legitimacy as well as develop their nations' productive capabilities and grow their economies. It was therefore not surprising to witness, during the Cold War era, the rise of state elites and one-party structures governed by client-patron networks. These structures impeded private sector economic activity and prospects for sustained, socially inclusive growth. The end of the Cold War and the introduction of structural adjustment programs further weakened African economies. Consequently, with limited availability of internal resources, state legitimacy was increasingly challenged.

It was during the decades 1990s and 2000s that African nations attempted to legitimize their regimes by ushering in a wave of "democratically" contested or politically elected regimes. However, the failure of the states to provide economic development opportunities and security to their citizens saw the re-emergence of political instability, which became manifest through organized violence, public mass demonstrations, or military coups d'état.

While it is impossible to predict the onset, incidence, or success rate of a potential military coup, yet by addressing some core economic and socio-political problems, governments could mitigate the risk of such an event. In other words, good governance and policies that provide economic opportunities for all citizens and that create the enabling environment for poverty reduction may be the panacea to tackle political instability. The following broad recommendations are therefore proposed as laying the foundations for a politically stable and prosperous future for the region:

- **To establish and ensure a form of democratic government that is based on the empowerment of ordinary citizens**, with a clear separation between the three poles of

government (executive, legislature, and judiciary), political pluralism, accountability and transparency, and respect for human rights.

- **To provide sustained levels of economic development and prosperity.** This will entail developing basic infrastructure (transportation, power, ICT, and water and sanitation); diversifying the economy; building productive capacities; reforming trade policies for increased income-generating opportunities; and reforming the financial system for increased access to means of production and export.
- **To provide equal educational, vocational and economic opportunities for all citizens** regardless of their social class, ethnicity, gender or geographical location. Boosting educational and vocational opportunities will help to address the massive youth unemployment challenge currently facing the region, which is alienating youth and creating social disaffection. Policies to boost social inclusion and social protection, particularly for those in remote rural areas and in slum settlements in the cities, will help to extinguish the sparks of social unrest which can be politically destabilizing and which may open the way to interventions such as military coups.

