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The Dark Decade of Coups: Can African Dictators learn from History?

In the last 10 years, there have been 7 successful coups in Africa and 10 coup attempts. The last one happened today, in Niger, where a military junta took over the presidential office where President Mamadou Tandja was having his weekly cabinet meeting. He is now kept in a military barrack, somewhere close to Niamey, the capital of Niger.

Last year, Madagascar experienced the same violent change of power, preceded by Mauritania and Guinea in 2008. Arguably, in some cases, the ousted leaders were pushing forward for reforms that did not resonate with the military elite, but in most cases, THEY had it coming.

Tandja recently changed the constitution to allow him to run for a third term in what was generally considered a mass fraud referendum. The country is poor and the people are suffering. But, how many times have we heard this story? In addition, don't we know what's going to happen next? The next leading group will advise the population to remain calm, it will call on the international community to acknowledge and support the next regime, then the African Union will condemn the coup and then the group will promise immediate elections which will not happen as soon as the coup orchestrators promised. Add to this some former and incumbent heads of state denouncing the coups and expressing their concerns. And then we hear nothing for a while.

You look at this picture and you ask yourself why dictators don't prevent these coups from happening.

If you're a dictator or a dictator in becoming you have to think that some disgruntled people will try to change something and when their legal means run out, or even before that, they will get organized and try to take over the state. Add to this the presence of a strong military force and then you get yourself a military coup "ready to be served".

The truth of the matter is that as the recent history of Africa shows, countries that have a strong military force are more likely to experience a coup than states that have reduced the military personnel. But then dictators experience another paradox. The more they express their authoritarian side, the more they need the military to stay in office. How long would Idriss Deby of Chad last in office if he fires the military troops he had under his command? Not that much, we can almost guarantee it. There is a rogue marriage of convenience between the army and one given dictator which is both vicious, despicable and ultimately unproductive.

Now, dictators would think that keeping the military under their shoe should not be that difficult, right? When all they have to do is keep the army happy, i.e. pay them enough to

protect you and your interests, then it shouldn't be that hard to stay in power for a long period of time.

But the situation is never that simple.

Dictators often do not have a pulse of what generals want. In other cases, they don't have enough money to cover all their demands. Getting money from agriculture or development in order to spend it on military personnel and technology is something you can do for one year, two, three seven but you cannot sustain that for ever. In addition, when your country is poor and I mean really, really poor (take Togo, Guinea, Central African Republic or Sao Tome and Principe for example) your annual budget, as rogue as it is, it's mostly financed by external agencies. And these agencies and governments do not like that you spend so much money on defense, especially since inter-country wars are a matter of the past at least in Africa.

Unless you have a tight grip of your entire economy, immediate access to significant resources, control over the army and preferably a large public support, being a dictator nowadays is not a fruitful and long-lasting career (except in the case of Zimbabwe where the situation is different). And that's what most dictators do not understand. Unless you can please all of these actors, or at least the majority of them, you are constantly threatened by unseen forces who want to remove you from office. And who will sooner or later unless you adapt.

And there is something else most of the authoritarian leader in Africa and beyond simply cannot comprehend, as most of them lack vision. It is sometimes more profitable to leave office sooner (when your economic ties and connections are stronger) than to wait until the military tries to remove you. Let's think of Daniel arap Moi who was in office in Kenya for 24 years. After he stepped down, he made a fortune and he and his family are among the wealthiest families on the continent. In addition, no one in the country can start an investigation on his family over transactions that occurred when Moi was in office. If more autocratic leaders were to think like Moi, both they and their countries would be spared from experiencing tumultuous times.

There is another phenomenon that anthropologists and political scientists have successfully analyzed in the past. It has to do with the "father of the nation" syndrome. Some dictators simply think of themselves as the saviors of their countries. Some were, and that still didn't prevent them from being ousted.

There are still autocratic leaders in Africa today and if they were to learn anything from the last ten years is this: you cannot please everyone for a long period of time. Business as usual is no longer a feasible option, and if you want to stay in power and spare your country from future instability and political turmoil, the least you can do is to gradually diminish the military forces.

Some leaders, like Julius Nyerere figured that out early in their careers and it served them well. Some never will. But one thing is for sure: there will never be peace and prosperity

in a country where the military sucks up a significant proportion of the annual budget simply because this service creates no added value in return. More soldiers NEVER means more development. Little development means limited state revenues, i.e. people cannot and some will simply not pay taxes. In addition, a large portion of citizens rely extensively on the state when jobs are scarce. No state revenues means that unavoidably not enough soldiers get their money in time. Which means you're most likely going to exit the scene through the back door of history sooner or later! It is a simple matter of logic.

There is one last point I'd like to make. In theory, coups are not the end of the world. If they happen because some people have the means to restore democracy, then they could, perhaps, be beneficial to the masses. But more often than not, behind every major coup, there's even a bigger economic interest. As one biographer astutely argued there is a "It's our time to eat" syndrome that governs much of the African political elite. Every time a coup happens the interests of the few drag down the interests of the many which makes one wonder: why haven't there been any revolutions since independence in Africa but only coups? One answer might be that in the eyes of the people all politicians are alike. As my research assistant once put it: "Politicians promise you the moon and then they steal the chair on which you are sitting."

Instead of solving current political, social and economic problems, coups only cause more political instability, mass panic and drive investors away. They also cause more suffering and poverty and despair. As long as African elites fail to respect and live up to their promises, we, Africans and Westerners alike, will be forced to talk and write about such regrettable events in recent history. And postpone our dreams and hopes for the African continent until after the next coup...

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