



+27 21 202 4071

info@ijr.org.za

<https://www.ijr.org.za>

Stay updated and follow us on social media



THE IJR WEEKLY LENS

16 April 2025 Column

By Norman Tanfield

BEYOND CORRUPTION: WHY GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE MATTERS MORE FOR PUBLIC TRUST

The return of the soldier-statesman

In Ouagadougou, young people cheer for Captain Ibrahim Traoré, not out of patriotism, but out of excitement. His speeches are remixed on TikTok, and Telegram channels celebrating his 'liberation.' This marks a shift in Africa's political landscape, where the soldier has re-emerged as a figure of hope for a disillusioned generation.

In countries like Gabon, Guinea, and parts of the Sahel, military takeovers are welcomed by a large number of youths. Though Africa has previously experienced military rule, especially after independence, the 1990s

“THE TRAGEDY IS NOT THAT AFRICA’S YOUTH ARE APPLAUDING COUPS—BUT THAT THEY’VE STOPPED BELIEVING ANYTHING BETTER IS POSSIBLE.”



saw a turn towards democracy. For a while, it seemed that the continent had moved beyond coups. But since 2013, nearly 20% of African nations have faced coups, with Africa accounting for almost half of the world's coups since 1950.

What's driving this return to military rule? Is it desperation, effective propaganda, or a mixture of both? Are these new military leaders offering real solutions, or are they simply exploiting a generation's frustration?

Behind this shift, China and Russia remain influential.

Is youth support real or a mirage?

Pro-coup sentiment appears widespread - on TikTok, in street rallies, and online. But how deep does this support go, and how authentic is it?

Studies reveal a decline in trust toward democratic institutions, particularly among the youth. According to Afrobarometer's inaugural flagship report released on 12 August 2024, while 64% of African youth (aged 18-35) prefer democracy over any other form of government, they express greater dissatisfaction with its implementation than older generations. Specifically, 60% of youth are dissatisfied with how democracy operates in their countries, and 40% perceive "most" or "all" officials in the presidency as corrupt.

Regarding Mali, an Afrobarometer dispatch from August 2020 indicates that almost two-thirds (64%) of Malians preferred democracy over any other political regime, with even larger majorities rejecting military rule (69%), one-party rule (76%), and one-man rule (87%).

However, a Bloomberg article from July 23, 2024, reports that more than 80% of those surveyed in Mali said the military should take over if elected rulers are not acting in the interests of their citizens, indicating a significant shift in public opinion following recent political events.

These findings highlight a complex landscape where African youth, while committed to democratic ideals, are increasingly disillusioned with democratic institutions.

This is not ideological loyalty, but exhaustion. Youth reject failed civilian rule, not democracy itself. Military juntas exploit frustration.

Social media also amplifies volume. A viral spectacle is not a genuine mandate. A TikTok video with 300,000 views does not mean 300,000 people support military rule. Spectacle sells.

Much of it may be manufactured through state media and paid influencers. The same platforms that praise soldiers can also hide the truth.

Youth support for coups may be genuine, but it is fragile, emotional, and dangerously misdirected. It does not stem from a belief in military rule but from a terrifying sense that nothing else remains.

The convenient but hollow neo-colonial scapegoat

When coups take place, it's common to hear France, for instance, blamed for the country's problems—whether it's terrorism, corruption, or economic dependence. Flags are burned, embassies attacked, diplomats expelled, and calls for sovereignty grow louder.

France's colonial legacy in Africa is undeniable, and its history has left deep scars. However, placing blame on France for all of Africa's challenges oversimplifies the situation. It risks overlooking the role of African leaders—both civilian and military—who have contributed to the failures through corruption, poor governance, and repression.

The unfortunate reality is that these new regimes often replace one foreign influence with another. As French forces withdraw, Russian mercenaries, including Wagner operatives, have stepped in. In places like Mali and Burkina Faso, Russian flags now fly beside those of local leaders. In the Central African Republic, the government has effectively outsourced its national security to Wagner in exchange for control over natural resources.

This shift isn't true sovereignty. It's simply a change in dependency. While these juntas denounce colonialism, they are forming new

alliances with countries like Russia and China, who do not push for democratic reforms and focus on economic interests.

Why aren't these regimes looking to more stable and peaceful African countries, like Senegal, Botswana, or Cape Verde, for inspiration? The truth is, the military juntas are looking for patrons who offer support without demanding accountability. In this way, the situation is not one of newfound independence but of a different kind of influence.

What have the soldiers achieved?

The soldiers came with promises of security, justice, and national renewal. They claimed democracy had failed and promised to do better. But what have they really delivered?

In 2023, Burkina Faso experienced its deadliest year, with over 6,000 civilians killed due to jihadist violence. Much of the country remains outside government control. Schools are closed, aid workers are targeted, and security continues to deteriorate.

On April 20, 2023, in the village of Karma, soldiers reportedly killed 156 civilians, mostly from the Fulani ethnic group, who have been unfairly associated with jihadist groups. Human rights organizations have raised concerns about what they call a "silent genocide" disguised as counterterrorism. This situation bears disturbing similarities to past atrocities, such as those in Darfur, where state-backed militias were responsible for mass killings. In Burkina Faso, the state-aligned militia, Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (VDP), has been linked to further ethnic violence, with 25 civilians killed in Nouna in February 2024.

In Mali, after expelling French forces, the junta turned to Russian mercenaries for support. In Guinea, protests are banned, and opposition is silenced. In Chad, Mahamat Déby continues to hold power through military means.

The economic situation is similarly grim: sanctions, inflation, and deteriorating public services.

East or West, someone still owns us

The juntas shout “France out!” as if sovereignty were a slogan or patriotism a simple order. But when the smoke clears, it is not independence that emerges—it’s substitution.

In Mali, French troops withdrew, and Russian mercenaries moved in. In Burkina Faso, the Russian flag flutters beside portraits of Traoré. In the Central African Republic, Wagner guards mines, tortures civilians, and props up President Touadéra - in exchange for silence.

China is no different. Its investments come with debt, opacity, and a vow never to ask questions about repression. Russia brings guns, China brings roads - both demand loyalty.

Question: Why are we ignoring Senegal’s peaceful transfers of power, Botswana’s governance, or Cape Verde’s political stability? Why don’t we look to African success stories, rather than chasing foreign strongmen?

From despair to agency

Democracy has failed too many for too long. The West has meddled and moralised, but it is our leaders who have also betrayed us. Blaming neo-colonialism while enriching new foreign masters is not liberation. Calling it

sovereignty while conscripting dissidents is not patriotism. Calling it democracy while jailing critics is delusion.

If Africa’s youth are turning to the gun, it’s because they see nothing else. The tragedy is not that they support juntas - but that they’ve stopped believing anything better is possible.

We must build systems where elections matter and dissent is safe. This change will not arise from uniforms or foreign flags but from difficult choices, common values, and unwavering honesty.

Ultimately, the true test of power is not how it begins, but what it ultimately becomes. So, dear youthful reader, before you applaud the next coup, ask yourself: When the drums fall silent and the boots reach my door, will I still be clapping?

PREVIOUS ISSUE



Is it Time For South Africa to Kiss the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) Goodbye?

IS IT TIME FOR SOUTH AFRICA TO KISS THE AFRICA GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY ACT (AGOA) GOODBYE?

The political dynamics of 10 South African ministers have been... (text continues)

refugee status, to... (text continues)

From already consulting millions of... (text continues)

10 APRIL 2023 COLUMN