

Giuseppe Ieraci, Federico Battera

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GIUSEPPE IERACI AND FEDERICO BATTERA

They Shoot Rulers, Don't They?

Political Institutionalisation and Coup d'État in Africa (2000-2022)

Using the cases of *coups d'état* in Africa in the period 2000-2022, it is argued that in democratic regimes the coup is connected to the conditions of weak political institutionalisation and of centralisation of executive power. Some indicators of the institutionalisation of the political process (i.e. election regularity and relatively significant levels of government turnover) are associated with the unlikelihood of a coup or in any case with its probable failure. Conversely, where the political process is poorly institutionalised and the system features a high level of centralisation of executive power (i.e. “strong” presidents), *coups d'état* are more frequent and successful. In the case of authoritarianisms, some “factors of the regime” (a party, a closed bureaucracy, the military body or the apparatus of violence), in various combinations in concrete cases, can succeed in re-stabilising the political regime and prevent the coup or reduce its success rate. *Coups d'état* as “critical junctures” in democracy have effective consequences only in conditions of low institutionalisation of the regime and/or of high centralisation of the executive powers.

KEYWORDS *Military Coups, Regime Change, Political Institutionalisation, Democracy, Authoritarianism.*

1. Introduction

In 1931, Curzio Malaparte published *Technique du coup d'état* and put forward the thesis that a coup is merely a “technical fact”, which could be skilfully carried out in any political context. This argument, implicitly made

Giuseppe Ieraci, Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Trieste, Piazzale Europa 1, 34127 Trieste, Italy, giuseppe.ieraci@dispes.units.it, orcid: 0000-0002-5837-7973 (corresponding author).

Federico Battera, Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Trieste, Piazzale Europa 1, 34127 Trieste, Italy, federico.battera@dispes.units.it, orcid: 0000-0002-9902-818X.

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years later by E. Luttwak (1969), tends to ignore the conditions of political stability of a regime which can greatly reduce not only the success of a coup but its very possibility. This research article has two main objectives. Firstly, it aims at exploring theoretically the conditions of political stability, in search of a structural explanation and moving critically away from the interpretations which hinge on path dependency and critical junctures. Although two other main approaches to the study of the political stability may be identified, such as the political culture approach (Almond and Verba, 1963) which addressed the investigation of the dominant beliefs and sources of legitimacy of a given regime, and the socio-centred approach which drew attention to the distribution of the social and economic resources and deep socio-economic inequalities (Eckstein, 1966; Gurr, 1970; Dahl, 1971), we will privilege the institutional approach which focused on the institutional and organisational control of social and political mobilisation as factors of regime stabilisation. It is underlined that institutional and organisational control play a key role in the stabilisation of a political regime. While democracies are normally highly institutionalised, as is proved by their capacity to transfer political power peacefully and smoothly, authoritarian regimes – or *non-democracies*, as they will later be generally labelled – are politically poorly institutionalised and they can only survive precariously as long as some “regime factors” (a political party, a bureaucracy penetrated by the dominant elite, or a loyal and efficient coercive apparatus) manage to stem social and political mobilisation against the power incumbents. Since authoritarianisms differ greatly depending on which factors are dominant (Morlino, 2008), we prefer to employ the all-encompassing notion of non-democracies to denote these regimes. In fact, we will not focus on the specific characteristics of non-democracies, but on an elementary trait that unites them, namely their low propensity to favour the transfer of power which is the main indicator of their very limited level of political institutionalization. Whatever the factors that explain the temporary stabilisation of non-democracies (a party, a cohesive military body, a bureaucracy, and the like), these regimes are inherently unstable and prone to collapse because they are unable to ensure the transfer and regeneration of the political power (Ieraci, 2013a; 2013b).

Secondly, using the cases of *coups d'état* in Africa in the period 2000-2022, we intend to argue that the coup is not merely a “technical fact” but that it is indeed connected to the condition of weak institutionalisation of the political regime and of centralisation of executive power, with the relative marginalisation of parliament and the opposition. In this perspective, the *coups d'état* could be interpreted as “critical junctures” that have effective consequences only in conditions of low institutionalisation of the regime or – in the case of non-democracies – in conditions of ineffectiveness of the factors of the regime. Our working hypothesis is that some indicators of

the institutionalisation of the political process (i.e. election regularity and relatively significant levels of government turnover) are clearly associated with the exceptional nature of the coup and in any case with its likely failure. Conversely, where the political process is poorly institutionalised and – as an intervening variable – the political process suffers from an excess of centralisation of executive power, *coups d'état* are more frequent and successful.

Clearly describing the concept and phenomenon of a *coup d'état* is not easy, due to the fact that it tends to be confused with other political phenomena, such as uprisings, revolutions, and civil revolts. According to Galetovic and Sanhueza (2000) coups have two distinctive features, that is that the masses do not participate directly in their execution; they are the business of the elite. A coup is a “technical matter” and involves a capacity of coordination and of execution which can be handled only by professionals (Wang, 1998). Calvert has already argued that because the techniques of attempting a coup are normally available only to a small elite (e.g., military forces) they are not «common property of the masses» (Calvert, 1979: 90). Coups are therefore usually attempted by the military because of their professional skills in the use of the instruments of violence, and their decisiveness and swiftness in the attempts (Zald and Berger, 1978; Jackman, 1978; Wells, 1974). According to McGowan, coups are «events in which existing regimes are suddenly and illegally displaced by the action of a relatively small group, in which members of the military, police or security forces of the state play a key role, either on their own or in conjunction with civilian elites such as civil servants, politicians and monarchs» (McGowan, 2003: 343).

Following the indications emerging from this debate, we have recorded *as coups d'état* in Africa in the period observed (2000-2022) all the cases that corresponded to these characteristics: 1. attempts conducted by a small core of military professionals or cohesive and organised political elites; 2. absence of widespread popular participation, or at least reduced incidence of the popular masses; 3. duration of the attempt limited to a few days; 4. target of the attempt traceable to the political and executive leadership of the state and regime. In summary, Powell and Thyne's definition (Powell and Thyne, 2011: 252) seems to us to capture well the elements that characterize coups as «illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive».

2. Theoretic Interpretation of Political Stability

Explanations of the *coup d'état* have often emphasised the incidence of a very wide range of factors, from social to more specifically economic ones, such as slow economic growth rates, to military spending (Collier and

Hoeffler, 2007), the presence of dominant ethnic groups and party system fragmentation (Jackman, 1978; Jackman, O’Kane, Johnson, McGowan and Slater, 1986), ethnic conflicts, various forms of political violence, any kind of socio-political rift, without neglecting religious divides, and finally previous coup experiences (Powell, 2012; Powell and Chacha, 2016; Gassebner, Gutmann and Voigt, 2016). It is undeniable that all these variables can combine to create the premises and facilitating conditions for a *coup d’état*. In addition, the use of sophisticated statistical models and multivariate analysis has the merit of identifying many significant links, of varying robustness and debatable theoretical significance¹. As we shall make clear, our intent is much more limited and starts from the exclusive and theoretically justified selection of only political variables. In particular we shall focus on the level of political institutionalisation of the regime as a central factor in explaining the coup. The question we will ask is whether the levels of institutionalisation of the political regime, and especially the democratic regime, affect the recurrence of coups. Democracy as such cannot offer complete guarantees against coups (Barka and Ncube, 2012) if – as we will assume – serious reasons for discontent among the groups within it and strong socio-economic inequalities persist, but if the institutionalisation of the democratic regime is complete or at least already underway there are reasons to assume that the occurrence of coups may be reduced, and ultimately our data will support this thesis. Ultimately, the political and prescriptive indication that emerges from our study is that the main instrument for the prevention and neutralization of coups – although not easy to achieve – is the growth of awareness of the functioning of democracy in the political class and rulers, i.e. the growth of the political institutionalisation of democracy, rather than the organisation of coercive apparatuses (De Bruin, 2020). Of course, a regime can and must defend itself against coup plotters, but the chances of its survival, particularly in the case of democracy, do not lie in the robustness of its police and repressive apparatuses, but in its ability to spread and win the bonds of democratic loyalty in the groups and political classes that make up the regime.

Democracy as a regime which institutionalises political accountability exhibits a relatively high capacity of guaranteeing both the power incumbents and the power challengers (Ieraci, 2021a). This bilateral guarantee is provided by established rules for the transmission of power and by its fixed term and range of action. Conversely, the congenital weakness of non-democracies lies in their limited level of political institutionalisation, which exposes the oppositions to the risk of being repressed by the unconstrained

¹ For a methodological criticism to the use in multiple-regression models of a large number of measures which are highly intercorrelated and unreliable (as such in Zimmerman, 1979), see Morrison and Stevenson (1976).

power holders, and eventually makes the transmission of power a rough matter with extremely high risks involved for both the actual power incumbents and their challengers. Huntington's well-known definition according to which «institutionalization is the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability» (Huntington, 1968a: 12) is very general and does not direct the attention to the functions fulfilled by the political institutions and to their different abilities to perform them effectively in various contexts². Huntington does state that the “political institutions” have to be distinguished from the “social forces” that make up the “political community”, and that a «political organization or procedure» (i.e. a “political institution”) «is an arrangement for maintaining order, resolving disputes, selecting authoritative leaders, and thus promoting community among two or more social forces» (Huntington, 1968a: 8-9), but paradoxically he does not develop these arguments in his further discussion of the concept of *institutionalisation*.

“Maintaining order”, “resolving disputes”, “selecting authoritative leaders”, and “promoting community” can be confidently be assumed as core *political functions* of a set of institutions in a given “political community” or political regime. These political functions may be performed at different levels of effectiveness in various contexts but they all depend on some basic features of institutions that could be grouped as: attribution of roles of authority, allocation of procedural and organisational resources attached to those roles, patterning of relationships among the roles into «arenas of institutional confrontation» (Ieraci, 2021a: 75-86; 2021b).

These three basic characteristics of political institutions are clearly identifiable in any democratic framework, regardless of the fact that they are formalised in written constitutions, although their relative level of effectiveness may vary according to the cases and their developmental stage. This changeable level of effectiveness is what we refer as the *political institutionalisation of a regime*. It is thanks to these characteristics and their effectiveness that the power transmission in a democracy, when compared with non-democracy, is made smooth by the fixing of the terms for each role, the establishment of the procedures for the turnover of the incumbents, the foreseeable radius of action of the roles, and their confinement by the use of fixed procedures and resources. One of the main consequences of this institutional functioning is that resources and procedures attached to the roles of

² Adaptability-rigidity, complexity-simplicity, autonomy-subordination, coherence-disunity (Huntington 1968a: 13-24) are more organizational criteria than direct indicators of true political institutionalization. An organization might well be extremely developed in terms of adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence, and yet offer very precarious answers to the basic issues of the allocation of power resources and the transmission of power.

authority are relatively autonomous from the individuals who are currently occupying them. Therefore, «an institution is something distinct from the social and political actors who make use of it [...] and an institution does not pursue any purpose, other than that defined from time to time by those who occupy them» (Ieraci, 2021a: 41).

If the dichotomy democracy versus non-democracy were represented as a series of continuous variables along the three characteristics above listed, there would result a constantly polarised distribution of the cases extracted to identify the two regimes. In a democracy, the distribution of the roles is fixed and horizontal, the allocation of the resources is stable and known *ex-ante*, the political confrontation takes place in highly formalised institutional arenas. These properties make the transmission of power through open competition sustainable. By contrast, in a non-democracy the distribution of the roles tends to be discretionary and hierarchical, the allocation of the resources is variable, and either there are no formally defined arenas of institutional confrontations among the roles, or they are badly defined. As a consequence, the power transmission cannot be open and it takes place through mechanisms of closed co-optation. However, this constitutive weakness of non-democracies, i.e. authoritarian regimes, does not imply a future, unavoidable win for democracy. Authoritarian regimes do face recurrent crises or outbursts of violent rebellion, and are permanently on the verge of breakdown but as many studies have proved they are able to survive for decades and their dominant elites manage quite often to ensure the continuity of the regime through the mechanism of political co-optation and thanks to such “regime factors” as have been previously suggested (a political party, a bureaucracy penetrated by the dominant elite, a loyal and efficient coercive apparatus). “Regime factors” latently refer to what Bellin (2004) considered aspects of the “robustness” of the authoritarian regimes³.

The institutional approach inaugurated by Huntington (1968a), points out that some internal “regime factors” (such as political parties⁴, state bureaucracies and apparatuses, military corps, regime militias) may extend their capacity for exercising social and political control over the population and the oppositions, fulfilling the main political functions of «maintaining order, resolving disputes, selecting authoritative leaders, and thus promoting community» (Huntington, 1968a: 8-9). Nonetheless the propensity of the non-democracies to survive, and their duration in the short and medium

³ See Cassani and Tomini (2019) on the related problem of the autocratization of the political regimes.

⁴ One of Huntington’s main arguments is that the recurrent crisis of participation and mobilization in changing and developing societies can be surmounted by their political institutions, among which political parties play an outstanding role (Huntington, 1968a: 89).

term, thanks to the “regime factors”, should not be mistaken for a sign of political stability. When eventually the regime organisations weaken, because the links between the organisations themselves and the supporting social groups loosen, or because new cycles of social mobilisation have been triggered, the non-democracies waver and sometimes fall. Non-democracies are inherently poorly institutionalised regimes because their functioning is not based on clearly established roles of authority, resources and procedures attached to such roles, and identifiable arenas of institutional confrontation. Compared to democracies, non-democracies exhibit an extremely low level of institutionalisation, as is revealed by their incapacity to assure a peaceful transmission of power. In a non-democracy the struggle for political power is not open and the political process furthers the interests of some privileged groups at the expense of others. Non-democracies may survive even facing loss of legitimacy and growing social inequalities, as long as the supporting social groups stay loyal, the regime is able to co-opt new supporters, and above all the “regime factors” carry on effectively controlling and channeling the popular mobilisation.

3. Political Institutionalisation. In Search of Some Indicators and Proxies

From the point of view that we are adopting, democracy with a relatively high level of institutionalisation allows political actors to occupy certain positions and to use the procedural and power resources associated with the roles occupied. By virtue of the temporary occupation of those positions, these actors, often organised in what we call political parties and linked to groups, interest associations and the like, are able to define what the public interest is⁵. In its functioning, democracy is a regime based on the *institutionalisation of the political accountability*. The limitations placed on the power holders constitute the main guarantee offered to those who are excluded from the exercise of power. The most formidable of the constraints that the power holders encounter lies in the very precariousness of the power itself,

⁵ Huntington's assertion that «one partial way out of the problem is to define the public interest in terms of the concrete interests of the government institutions» can only be accepted if care is taken not to confuse the institutions with their *pro tempore* occupants, or rather to consider the former as a “possession” of the latter. Therefore, that statement should be read like this: that public interest in politics is determined by the concrete interest of *those who occupy* the government institutions. This implies that “public interest”, whatever it means, changes when the incumbents change, and therefore – as in Huntington's words – we can conclude that «the public interest, in this sense, is not something which exists *a priori* in natural law or the will of the people» (Huntington, 1968: 24-25).

which is only temporary; other constraints are provided by the constitutional provisions, either written or established by practices (Ieraci, 2021a: 32-39; 2021b).

This approach does not necessarily imply the dismissal of the neo-contractual perspective, according to which political institutions and constitutions are voluntary constructs aimed at solving coordination problems or even at reducing transaction costs (North e Weingast, 1989; North, 1990). However, the neo-realist approach to the study of institutions looks at the political struggle and, without reticence, admits that in politics there are those who win and those who lose (Moe, 1990). Therefore, political institutions would serve to mitigate the costs of inclusion and exclusion from the enjoyment of political power. In other words, in democracy the function of political institutions is to stabilise the expectations of winners and losers, thus guaranteeing their relative positions through the institutionalisation of political accountability, and its two basic conditions are the *effectiveness and radius of the exercised political authority* and the *likelihood of government turnover*, that is the likelihood of an exchange of position between the incumbents of the role of political authority and their challengers (Ieraci, 2021a: 31-32).

To evaluate both these dimensions of the institutionalisation of political responsibility, we will therefore have to look both at the effective distribution of political power, in its regularisations and/or formalisations, and at the turn-over of government in the cases studied. We are now able to develop our initial working hypothesis and to state that some indicators of the institutionalisation of the political process are negatively correlated to the likelihood of *coups d'état*. With regard to the *likelihood of government turnover*, namely:

Hp 1: Election regularity and relatively significant levels of government turnover, therefore a relatively high level of institutionalisation of democracy, should be associated with the improbability of a coup or in any case with its likely failure.

The rationale for this hypothesis is easily explained and it is in accordance with Przeworski's (2014). If the political competition is sufficiently open to feed the challengers' expectation of political victory at least in the medium term, it is likely that the players will be willing to moderate their attitudes, to accept the democratic "game" and respect its rules, without attempts to resort to violence or conflict to overthrow the incumbents. Powell (2009) underlined that the support of any unconstitutional seizure of power, that is any attempt to break down the democratic functioning, is likely to fail if there are no structural triggering factors that may induce the coup instigators and the general public to expect and support the overthrow of

the current government. Conversely, where the political process is poorly institutionalised as indicated by a low rate of government turnover, one should expect that the political process suffers from rigidity and that the acrimony and frustration of the challengers should trigger their temptation to resort to violence. In these cases, *coups d'état* should be more frequent and successful. Belkin and Schofer (2003) argued that a coup is more likely where the organisational structure of the government, its political regime and in some cases the long-term social perception of its legitimacy are more uncertain and weaker (Thompson, 1975; Auvinen, 1997).

However, the institutionalisation of political accountability also depends on the effectiveness of political authority and on its range of action. Studies on institutionalised power in Africa have often underlined the personalisation of power and the presence of “Big men” in politics, who dominate the scene and exercise an almost authoritarian control, even in democratic and constitutional contexts (Van Cranenburgh, 2008). We can assume for instance that the centralisation of the executive power in unbalanced presidential systems, if combined with a low probability of government turnover, also has the effect of making the political process immoderate and inducing the challengers to follow the option of conflict and the coup attempt. Indeed, the expectation of the challengers to legally overthrow incumbents may be low, particularly if the latter have developed patronage and ties with specific groups within the political community. The centralisation of strong powers in certain roles, albeit institutionalised, can lead challengers to extreme and even illegitimate attempts to conquer the power of government, namely:

Hp 2: High centralisation of the executive power in poorly institutionalised and unbalanced institutional settings should be associated with the likelihood of a coup and with an immoderate political process.

In the following sections, we will test these two hypotheses on a sample of 31 attempt of *coups d'état* in 16 African countries during 2000-2022, and a third hypothesis-corollary that a *contrario* could be thus formulated:

Hp 3: Poorly institutionalised settings, such as the non-democracies, which suffer from a weakening of the underlining factors of their regime, should be associated with the likelihood of the coup and with an immoderate political process.

4. The Data Set

To test our hypotheses, we initially created a data set of *coups d'état* in the period 2000-2022 in a number of African states that have had experience of democratisation or that can be called democratic countries to some

extent, and among some African non-democracies or purely facade democracies. On the one hand, the selection of countries with some democratic experience as a sample of analysis is functional to the control of our two hypotheses. In fact, in non-democracies it is likely that the role of militaries, revolutionaries, extreme opponents and the like is more recurrent and obvious, given the extremely low level of institutionalisation of these regimes. Previous researches indeed (Bouazid, 2011) showed evidence that non-democratic political regimes accelerate the recurrence of coup plots. On the other hand, in the 2000s there has been an acceleration of democratisation processes in the world, which in particular concerned Africa itself.

Table 1 presents the data set on the 31 cases of coups recorded in the period 2000-2022. We identified the main actors involved in them, the targets of the coups, the goal of the actors or their “political justification” in the attempts, short- and long-term outcomes of the attempts, and the record of the previous coups in each case. With regard to the targets, we identified as “Military-Civilian Governments” (MCG) those governments in which militaries (e.g. high rank officers) occupy key ministerial portfolios in the government (e.g., defence, home affairs, foreign office, economic ministries). In some case, this criterium may raise ambiguities, as in the case of the Algerian coup of March 2019, when the target of the coup was primarily the presidency, although the deputy defence minister (but *de facto* acting minister) was a military. Civilian Governments (CG) are necessarily all those exclusively composed by non-military ministries and personnel. In some cases, the coups were addressed both against the CG and highest ranks in the regime, or against other civilian institutions, as in the case recorded in Guinea in 2008 when a *coup d'état* occurred in December, six hours after the announcement of the death of President Lansana Conté. The coup prevented the President of the National Assembly from assuming the Presidency in accordance with the Constitution. The cases recorded in Table 1 total to 31, out of which 19 had CGs as targets, 6 were directed against MCGs, one was against a military regime (Mauritania 2005) and one against the Transitional council (with mixed civilian-military composition) in Burkina Faso (2015).

As for the goals of the actors and the “political justification” that they give of the coup attempt, we essentially distinguished between pro-democratic and defensive “justifications”, and attempts against the ruling political coalition, that is, against the establishment in power in that given phase. A “defensive coup” is carried out by those who want to defend their interests against an event that threatens them (e.g. Algeria 2019 or Burkina Faso 2015). Obviously, it too affects the ruling coalition, as a whole (Burkina Faso 2015) or only partially (the civilian component and part of the military one, as in Algeria 2019). In the latter case, it can oppose various military components, those “represented” by the government and those

TAB. 1 – *Overview of the coups d'état in Africa (2001-2022)*

Countries	Coups	Actors	Targets	Goal of the actors and “political justification”	Short term outcome (within one month)	Long term outcomes (within one year)	Previous Coups
<i>Algeria</i>	Mar. 2019	Highest ranks	CG	Defensive	After mass protests the President is forced to resign.	New presidential elections held Dec. 2019	1965 1992
<i>Burkina Faso</i>	Oct. 2014	Officers	MCG	Pro-Democratic	Following popular uprising against auth. regime military takeovers; bloodless	Attempted coup (2015)	1966 1980 1982
	Sep. 2015	Highest ranks (Pres. Guard)	Transitional Council (mixed)	Defensive	Failure and restatement of Trans. Council	General elections (2015)	1983 1987
	Jan. 2022	Officers	CG	Against the ruling political coalition	Bloodless; Assumption of power by the military	Interim military President removed from office	
	Sep. 2022	Officers	MCG	Defensive	Bloodless; Assumption of power by the military		
	May 2015	Highest ranks	MCG	Against 3 rd mandate of the President	Failure		
<i>Burundi</i>							1965 1966 1966 1976 1987 1996
<i>Chad</i>	Mar. 2006	Officers	MCG	Against the ruling political coalition	Failure		1975 1982 1990
<i>Egypt</i>	Feb. 2011	Highest ranks	MCG	Defensive	Following mass protests; Bloodless; Assumption of power by the military	Preparing for elections (May 2012)	1952
<i>Gabon</i>	Jul. 2013	Highest ranks	CG	Defensive	Following mass protests; Bloodless; Civilian Interim president junta appointed; mass protests followed and repressed	Abdel Fattah el-Sisi elected President	
	Jan. 2019	Officers	CG	Pro-Democratic	Failure		1964

Countries	Coups	Actors	Targets	Goal of the actors and “political justification”	Short term outcome (within one month)	Long term outcomes (within one year)	Previous Coups
<i>Gambia</i>	Dec. 2014	Officers (Pres. Guard)	MCG	Pro-Democratic	Failure		1994
<i>Guinea</i>	Dec. 2008	Officers	Civil institutions	Defensive	Bloodless; Military junta established	Mass protests and killings; the head of the Junta Camara wounded after an assassination attempt; the country prepares for presidential elections in 2010	1984
<i>Guinea Bissau</i>	Sep. 2021	Officers	CG	Against 3 rd mandate of the President	Bloodless; Military junta established	pending	
	Sep. 2003	Highest ranks	CG	Against the ruling political coalition/ Defensive	Bloodless; establishment of a transitional CG	Legislative elections held in March 2004	1980 1999
	Aug. 2008	Highest ranks	CG	Against the ruling political coalition/Defensive	Failure		
	Apr. 2010	Highest ranks	CG and Highest ranks	Against the ruling political coalition/Defensive	Failure and restating of CG		
	Apr. 2012	Highest ranks	CG	Defensive	Bloodless; establishment of a National Transitional Council and interim government.	Transition lasted up to the 2014 general elections	
<i>Madagascar</i>	Feb. 2022	Officers	CG	Defensive	Failure		
	Nov. 2006	Highest ranks	CG	Against the ruling political coalition	Failure		1972 1975
	Mar. 2009	Highest ranks	CG	Against the ruling political coalition	Bloodless; Following popular uprising military takeover; civilian Transitional authority put in charge	Power sharing deal between political factions	
	Nov. 2010	Officers (special forces)	CG	Against the ruling political coalition	Failure		

Countries	Coups	Actors	Targets	Goal of the actors and “political justification”	Short term outcome (within one month)	Long term outcomes (within one year)	Previous Coups
<i>Mali</i>	Mar. 2012	Officers	CG and retired generals	Defensive	Bloodless; Military junta established	Still in the hands of the military junta; return to elections in July 2013	1968 1991
	Aug. 2020	Officers	CG and Highest ranks	Against the ruling political coalition	Bloodless; Military junta established	Sep. 2020 a retired general is named interim president	
	May 2021	Officers	Interim President	Defensive	Bloodless; the leader of the former military junta acting president	pending	
<i>Mauritania</i>	Aug. 2005	Officers (Pres. Guard)	Military regime	Pro-Democratic	Bloodless; Military junta established	Preparation of elections held in 2007	1978 1979 1980 1984
<i>Niger</i>	Aug. 2008	Highest ranks (Pres. Guard)	CG	Defensive	Bloodless; Military junta established	Aug. 2009 elections of the Head of the Junta as President	
	Feb. 2010	Officers	CG	Against the 3 rd mandate of the President	Bloodless; Military junta established	General elections held in Jan. 2011 with the exclusion of previous President	1974 1996 1999
<i>São Tomé</i>	Jul. 2003	Officers	CG	Defensive	Bloodless; Military junta relinquished power to CG after agreement		1995
<i>Sudan</i>	Apr. 2019	Highest ranks	MCG	Defensive	Bloodless; Creation of a trans. military council	Agreement reached on transition government and Constitution	1958 1969 1985 1989
<i>Zimbabwe</i>	Oct. 2021	Highest ranks	CG	Defensive	Bloodless; mass protests followed; Reinstatement of the CG after 1 m.		
	Nov. 2017	Highest ranks	CG	Defensive	Bloodless; Vice-President removed the President with the help of the army	General elections held in Jul. 2018, Mnangagwa elected President	-

Table Legend: MCG, Militar-Civilian Governments; CG, Civilian Governments.

who feel excluded. A coup against the ruling political coalition is aimed at changing the coalition of power. Such a coalition may be ruling an authoritarian regime (Chad 2006) or a democratically elected regime (Guinea Bissau 2003). Among the justifications of the coups, there are three cases where it appeared to be an attempt to prevent the incumbent President from being re-elected for a third and not constitutionally allowed mandate. These coups obviously also affected the coalition in power and led to new democratic elections, with the exclusion of the previous coalition (Niger 2010), or triggered a larger influence of the military in politics (as in the attempt recorded in 2021 in Guinea).

Ultimately, we count 15 coups that have a primarily defensive “justification”, four pro-democrats, six against the ruling coalition, three that have a mixed defensive character and against the ruling coalition, and finally three that are connected to the attempt of the president in office to break the constitution and be re-elected for a third term. These latter cases are indeed ambiguous, as they could be assimilated into cases with a defensive “justification” of democracy. This justification, of course, is often instrumental and the subsequent political outcome is rarely a strengthening of democracy (Miller, 2011). With regard to the actors reported in Tab. 1, they are military, although in some cases they are of lower rank or attached to special security bodies. Among the cases reported in Table 1, there are 16 attempts by military officers (below the rank of general, sometimes Presidential Guards or members of special forces), 11 of which were successful. The remaining 15 attempts were by highest military ranks (generals) and it is relevant to underline that the political justification given for these coups was always “defensive” or against the 3rd mandate of the incumbent President. The role of the military in the attempts of coups shows the factional nature of the military apparatus in non-democracies and reinforces our hypothesis that coups are easier and more likely in regimes characterised by low political institutionalisation. Finally, short- and long-term outcomes were added as merely descriptive pieces of information to help in identifying the purposes of the actors, and the list of the previous coups in each case serves to reveal a tradition of military intervention.

5. Power Distribution and Government Turnover in Africa (2000-2022)

This is a question of seeing whether these trends can be explained in the light of our two working hypotheses (see above par. 3), namely that these coups are linked to a relatively modest level of institutionalisation of democracy and to high degrees of concentration of executive power. In this

TAB. 2 – *Non-democracy, Institutionalization of Democracy and coups d'état in Africa (2001-2022). A Comparative Overview*

Countries	Coups Year/ Outcome	Free Elections	Regular Tim- ing of the Elec- tions	Opposition Boycott	Turnover	Last democratic instauration and lapse to the next coup (years)	
<i>Algeria</i>	2019	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	
<i>Burkina Faso</i>	2014	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	
	2015	F	N.a.*	N.a.*	Yes	N.a.	
	2022	S	Yes	Yes	No	2015 (7)	
	2022	S		Non-democracy		2015 (7)	
<i>Burundi</i>	2015	F		Non-democracy		N.a.	
<i>Chad</i>	2006	F		Non-democracy		N.a.	
<i>Egypt</i>	2011	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	
	2013	S	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	2012 (1)
<i>Gabon</i>	2019	F		Non-democracy		N.a.	
<i>Gambia</i>	2014	F		Non-democracy		N.a.	
<i>Guinea</i>	2008	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	
	2021	S	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	2010 (11)
<i>Guinea Bissau</i>	2003	S	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	1994 (9)
	2008	F	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	2005 (3)
	2010	F	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	2005 (5)
	2012	S	Yes	Yes	No	No	2005 (7)
	2022	F	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	2012 (10)
<i>Madagascar</i>	2006	F	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	1993 (13)
	2009	S	Yes	No	No	No	1993 (16)
	2010	F	No	No	No	No	N.a.
<i>Mali</i>	2012	S	Yes	Yes	No	No	1992 (20)
	2020	S	Yes	Yes	No	No	2013 (7)
	2021	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	
<i>Mauritania</i>	2005	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	
	2008	S	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	2007 (1)
<i>Niger</i>	2010	S	Yes	Yes	No	No	1999 (11)
<i>São Tomé</i>	2003	S	Yes	No	No	Yes	1996 (7)
<i>Sudan</i>	2019	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	
	2021	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	
<i>Zimbabwe</i>	2017	S		Non-democracy		N.a.	

Table Legend: S, Success of the coup; F, failure of the coup.

* Not applicable: After 2014 coup, in 2015 a coup is attempted against the transitional government in power.

paragraph we will focus on the first hypothesis and then on the problem of the institutionalisation of democracy in the cases considered.

Table 2 presents all the 31 cases of coups recorded and connects them to some simple proxies of the degree of institutionalisation of democracy, which obviously cannot be applied to the cases of non-democracy as identified in Table 2. These proxies of democratic institutionalisation are: the

holding of free elections, the regularity in the sequencing of the elections, the propensity or not of the opposition to boycott the elections and finally the turnover among the competing political factions. As already anticipated in the previous paragraphs, the basic assumption is that the regularity of the democratic process carries out an implicit pedagogical function on the political classes, accustoming them to the democratic game and making its outcome acceptable to them.

In the condition of a relative institutionalisation of democracy, based on the hp. 1 advanced by us in par. 3, coups should either be rare or doomed to failure. This hypothesis seems to hold up quite well in comparison with the picture presented in Table 2. First of all, the *coups d'état* attempted in non-democracies, as expected, are usually successful. Here the institutions do not place any limits on the interference in the political sphere and only the disposition of the “factors of the regime” (the military, a closed bureaucracy, a branched party apparatus) can explain the resilience of these regimes. The non-democracies, as also mentioned above (Ieraci 2013a; 2013b) suffer from an inability to transfer power, linked to their very negligible level of institutionalisation. Therefore, the line with our hypothesis, the frequency (14 cases) and the success of coups in non-democracies (in 10 cases out of 14) are consistent elements. Only in two non-democracies (Burundi 2015 and Chad 2006) two coups failed, due to the reacting capacity of the existing regime.

In the 17 cases of coups attempted in democracies, the explanatory framework becomes complicated. In fact, we have registered 6 unsuccessful attempts and 11 successful ones and to attempt an interpretation of this trend it is necessary to look at the proxies of democratic institutionalisation. We immediately realize that, of the eleven successful attempts, seven take place in contexts where the democratic game does not produce government turnover. It is therefore a question of democracies lacking a fundamental element of institutionalisation, namely the replacement in the positions of the government and the opposition. In the case of Guinea 2021, in addition to the absence of turnover, the success of the coup is linked to the boycott suffered by the opposition. In Mali (2012, 2020 and 2021) the success of coups is always linked to the essence of turnover and also to the irregularity in the timing of the elections. The coups recorded in Guinea Bissau show a dynamic of institutionalisation of democracy that is still very uncertain, but nonetheless undeniable. Only three of the six attempts are successful, those of 2008 and 2010 fail, linked to the recent government turnover, finally the 2022 coup has failed, which is now ten years after the previous one (2012), perhaps a sign that the democratic game is also becoming the “only game in town” there (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

To understand the trend of these cases in democracies, it is also necessary to look at the institutional arrangements. In the light of our hp. 2 (par.

TAB. 3 – “Big Men Rule” in Africa. The Procedural Resources of the Presidents vs. the Cabinets*

Country	Type of Election	Term of office (yrs.)	Re-eligibility	Ministerial appointments and dismissals	Appointments and dismissals of Head of Cabinet
<i>Algeria</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Burkina Faso</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Burundi</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	No
<i>Chad</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Egypt</i>	Direct popular	4	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Gabon</i>	Direct popular	7	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Gambia</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	N.a.**
<i>Guinea</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Guinea Bissau</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Madagascar (2007)</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Mali (2020)</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Mauritania</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Niger</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>São Tomé</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Sudan (2019)</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Zimbabwe</i>	Direct popular	5	Yes	Yes	N.a.**

* Reference is to the status quo immediately before and during the coup.

** Not applicable, the President is the Head of Cabinet.

Source: adaptation from Ieraci (2003, 2010).

3) it is probable that the presence of “Big men” of politics, whose rise can be favoured by presidential and dominant executives, induces antagonistic groups to attempt a coup to overthrow the “Big men”. We will address this verification in the following par. 6.

6. Political Institutionalisation and *coups d'état* in Africa (2000-2022)

Our implicit argument is that certain characteristics of the institutional arrangements of the African democracies under examination may favour coups. The reason for this trend is that very top-down institutional arrangements with centralised executive power can contribute to the emergence of “Big men”, as they have sometimes been defined (Van Cranenburgh, 2008). Table 3 reveals in fact that we are always in the presence of presidential regimes, in which precisely those characteristics can be traced.

All the cases considered by us provide for the direct election of the President, his re-eligibility and very extensive co-confrontations with the cabinet or executive (except in the case of Sao Tome, where the elected

TAB. 4 – “Big Men Rule” in Africa. *The Procedural Resources of the Presidents vs. the Legislatures*

Country	Procedural resources				Scores
	Dissolution of parliament	Veto Power	Activation of the legislative process	Declaration of a state of emergency	
<i>Algeria</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Burkina Faso</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Burundi</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Chad</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Gabon</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Gambia</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Guinea</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Madagascar</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Mali</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Sudan</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Zimbabwe</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Egypt</i>	1	1	1	1	4
<i>Mauritania</i>	1	0	0	1	2
<i>Niger</i>	1	0	0	1	2
<i>São Tomé</i>	1	1	0	0	2
<i>Guinea Bissau</i>	0	1	0	0	1

Table Legend: 1 = presence of the specified presidential resource; 0 = absence of the specified presidential resource.

Source: adaptation from Ieraci (2003, 2010).

President cannot dismiss the ministers). These structures can be defined as “separate dyadic” (Ieraci, 2021b), as they are based on the clear separation of the survival of the presidential executive from the legislative one. Guinea Bissau, which was previously the most controversial case, also respects this tradition of African politics in adopting the presidential executive model, thus probably accentuating the antagonism of the political factions excluded from power.

Similarly, if we look at the powers or procedural resources of the Presidencies in relation to the legislatures (Table 4), we observe hegemonic presidencies, which can dissolve the parliament, exercise veto power over legislation, activate the legislative process (also through decree), or declare a state of emergency. The presidencies of Mauritania, Niger, Sao Tome and Guinea Bissau appear “milder”. In the case of Guinea Bissau, the president has the power of veto but cannot dissolve the parliament or initiate the legislative process. This safeguard of the legislative with respect to the presidency in the case of Guinea Bissau is the variable that with some probability explains the trend of coup attempts in that case. We cannot exclude that a certain

expectation of turnover, connected to an institutional system that does not centralise too much the powers on the presidency, favours the moderation of the “excluded” from power, facilitates the learning of the democratic game and its internalisation as value and norm among political actors. The case of Guinea Bissau is particularly significant, as it shows that even a weak level of institutionalisation of democracy allows the regime to develop some “anti-body” against the coup leaders, who see their attempts fail.

7. *Coups d'état* as “Critical Junctions”. A Conclusion

Our conclusions should appear clear enough. *Coups d'état* cannot easily occur everywhere, as if they were a simple technique of seizing power, according to the intuition of Malaparte (1931) followed by Luttwak (1969). Their probability decreases if certain conditions of the regime's political institutionalisation are met. In the case of Ghana, for instance, the six attempted and successful coups were recorded since the declaration of independence of the country in 1981. This initial phase was followed by the stabilising of an autocracy, but since 1996 the consolidation of the democratic presidential system, with a regular government turnover of the two main parties on the scene, has allowed Ghana to overcome the turbulent phase of its first democratisation and to effectively defeat the coup syndrome. The case of political institutionalisation and democratic competition in Ghana shows that these factors are decisive in reducing the likelihood of *coups d'état*, because they make political turnover a regular event and a credible expectation of political actors.

Given that non-democracies suffer from an evident maximum institutional deficit, the level of institutionalisation of the democracies varies according to the probability/ease of the transfer of power and the predictability and containment of the range of action of power itself. We have assumed that these political functions of institutions (favouring the transfer of power; making the range of power predictable and containing) can be indicated by variables such as government turnover and the regularity of the democratic game (probability of the transfer of power) and the degree of centralisation of the executive power in particular against the legislative (predictability and containment of the range of action of power). These qualities of the institutional functioning of democracy should moderate the action of those in power, because they fear the probability of being defeated and substituted in the short-medium term, and the conflictual attitude of those excluded from power, because they do not feel their positions threatened and because for them the probability of obtaining power in the short to medium term is realistic (Ieraci, 2021a). On the contrary, non-democra-

cies are prone to the recurrence of coups, unless they can count on some “factors of the regime” – typically strong military and repressive apparatuses, or a pervasive party organization – which prevent or repress any attempt, or favour the establishment of exclusive links between the rulers and some privileged groups.

This interpretation is in line with that of Goldstone *et al.* (2010) that asserts that with the exception of countries described as being fully democratic or fully autocratic, all alternative political regimes, whether partial autocracies or partial democracies with or without factionalism, have a significantly higher risk of adverse regime change. With regard to Africa, McGowen (2003) pointed out that a large percentage (47.3 %) of coups actually took place against existing military regimes which themselves had seized power illegally. Similarly, Jenkins and Kposowa (1990; 1992), and Wang (1998) support the evidence that military coups are recurrent and constitute the main cause of regime changes, both in democratic and non-democratic contexts. Consistently, we found that on average coups occurred after eight years since the inauguration of democracy, an insufficient lapse of time for a democracy to take root.

The comparative results of our research conducted on 31 *coups d'état* recorded in Africa in the period 2000-2022 support these interpretative lines. The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. *coups d'état* are more recurrent and destined to success in non-democracies;
2. *coups d'état* can also occur in democracies, but their success rate appears to be reduced;
3. in particular, if democracies register a significant degree of institutionalisation, marked above all by the probability of turnover in power, *coups d'état* are less likely, and in any case more likely to be destined to failure;
4. in the absence of effective government turnover, the incidence and frequency of *coups d'état* in Africa even in democratic contexts can however be explained by the spread of institutional arrangements that concentrate power in quasi-imperial presidencies, favouring the rise of “Big men” in a dominant position.

While highly institutionalised regimes, as democracies normally are, manage to stem social and political mobilisation against the power incumbents, poorly institutionalised regimes, as often in the case of non-democracies or authoritarianisms, can only precariously survive as long as some “regime factors” (a political party, a bureaucracy penetrated by the dominant elite, a loyal and efficient coercive apparatus) are effective in controlling mobilisation and political conflict.

Regarding 1. we can further remark that in the non-democracies some factors of the regime (a party, a closed bureaucracy, the military body and the apparatus of violence), in various combinations in concrete cases, fill the power vacuum and can succeed in stabilising the political regime. Nonetheless, this stabilisation is precarious and it is short-sighted to envisage the “strength” or “robustness” of the “factors of the regime” (Bellin, 2004) as indicators of consolidation or political stability of the regimes. In the medium-long term the use or threat of violence and the exploitation of privileged links between the power elites and some “clients” creates disaffection and anger in the excluded, even creating the conditions even for rebellion. The attempt to overthrow the autocrats who are organising the coups often seem to their opponents the only way of getting rid of them.

With regard to 4. we can point out that African presidencies are often characterised by the centralisation of power in the presidency to such an extent as to favour the emergence of so-called “Big men”. Furthermore, the ethnic divisions and the patronage vote that often characterizes these contexts increases the resentment of those excluded from power and can foster the temptation of the coup to overthrow the “Big men”. All the cases of coup that we register in democratic contexts take place in fact in the presence of presidential structures with “strong presidencies”.

Our interpretations are ultimately “structural”. We do not deny that certain conjunctures may have a crucial role in explaining political and social change (Pierson, 2004), but more in line with institutional explanations (Scharpf, 1997) we believe that these conjunctures would hardly have any effect if not in the presence of “structural” conditions (e.g. the variable levels of political institutionalisation) that make them effective trigger factors of change. More directly, a *coup d'état* can be a historical “conjuncture” that determines the collapse of a regime if – and only if – that regime is already “structurally” undermined and prone to collapse (e.g. absent or low level of institutionalisation). The *coup d'état* is not simply a technical fact, it cannot occur everywhere and if it occurs in less favourable contexts (institutionalised democracy) it is highly likely to fail.

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