

Gabon and Coup Mania

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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

It starts with a presumption, makes its way through a discussion, and becomes a set, moulded stereotype: Africa is the continent of tin pot dictatorships, unstable leaderships, and coups. Latin America, attuned to brigandage and frontier mentalities, is not far behind. Such instances lend themselves to the inevitable opportunity to exploit the exception. Gabon, ruled by the same family without interruption since 1967, is being stated as a possible example.

The news so far, if one dares trust it, suggests that a coup was put down in the African state with the loss of two lives. Seven of the plotters were captured a mere five hours after they seized a radio station, during which Lieutenant Kelly Ondo Obiang broadcast a message [claiming](#) that President Ali Bongo's New Year's Eve message "reinforced doubts about the president's ability to continue to carry out of the responsibilities of his office." Bongo, for his part, had [seemed](#) indisposed, suffering a stroke in October and slurring his words in a speech during a December 31 television appearance.

As with other attempted coups, the plotters portrayed themselves as up-market planners in the Brutus mould. They were killing Caesar to save Rome. In this case, the men of the Patriotic Movement of the Defence and Security Forces of Gabon were keen to "restore democracy". The attempt was put down with some speed. "The situation is under control," came a government statement some hours after security forces regained control of the RTG state broadcasting headquarters. Guy-Bertrand Mapangou, true to the sort of form shown by a regime unmoved, insisted that, "The government is in place. The institutions are in place."

The coup fascination may not be healthy but is nonetheless fascinatingly morbid. Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne from the University of Central Florida and University of Kentucky cannot get enough of the business, and have compiled a register of failure. These political scientists insist on [defining](#) coups as "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive". But having to presumably stake some exceptional view to the field, the authors insist that those who go through with a coup have power for at least seven days. (Why not six or eight?)

This cottage industry invariably produces much smoke but a conspicuous lack of fire. In 2016, with the failed coup in Turkey unfolding, James McCarthy, [writing](#) for Wales Online, insisted on a guidebook approach, drawing from Thyne and Powell's research. They, according to McCarthy, "found there were 457 coup attempts between 1950 and 2010. Of those, 227 were successful and 230 failed." Invariably, the Americas and Africa feature as the prominent zones of coups.

The BBC has felt free to [run](#) with a map featuring African states "with the highest number of

coups since 1952,” a kind of morbid horror show of instability. Sudan is a big league player in this regard with 14, followed by other states which seem to be in competition with each other (Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Benin and Nigeria come in with eight; Sierra Leone and Ghana sport ten).

Unmentioned in the show was the number of times conspirators, cabals and groups have been encouraged, courtesy of external powers, to sabotage fledgling democratic regimes and back counter-revolutionary agents. As important as the coup plotters are the coup backers, often to be found in Washington and European policy planning departments and company boardrooms. The story of stuttered, mutated revolutions in Africa and Latin America is very much one of externally directed coups as much as failed local experiments.

The issue, as if it matters much, about whether a coup is, or is not happening, is a constant theme. According to Powell,

“Coup leaders almost invariably deny their action was a coup in an effort to appear legitimate.”

This is banally leaden as an observation. All coups must, by definition, be asserted as acts of dissimulation, and not savage, all extirpating revolutions. To merely depose a leadership is, by definition, conservative. In a modern state, decapitation might create some initial chaos but leaves the structure, for the most part, intact. Coups often have the effect of shoring up the junta, in whatever form it takes.

The field of coup gazing also has a moral edge. There are coups with supposedly good import, and those that are not. Portugal’s “Carnation Revolution” ending the seemingly interminable rule of António de Oliveira Salazar, is cited as one example. A coup might engender fertile grounds for a democratic movement, or suffer entropic decline before authoritarian reassertion. A good coup, [speculated](#) the *Washington Post*, took place in Burkina Faso in 2015, with the end of Blaise Compaoré’s rule. The same paper does note the rather banal qualifier: that “policymakers and academics should not get too excited about the allegedly positive consequences of coups in Africa.” African armies, for instance, might propel democratic elections; they might just as well remain in power.

Scholars such as Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way [argue](#) that multiparty elections in the aftermath of change can just be a front. Democratic talk can be so much babble before manipulating strongmen. “Competitive authoritarian regimes,” argue the authors, can entrench themselves. All this seems beside the point in Gabon, a distant murmur to the academic discourse and policy ponderings that dazzle a good number of analysts. The obvious point tends to be same: coups tend to be rooted in evolutionary orthodoxy rather than earth shattering revolution. They are also often the work of unseen hands behind unstable thrones. Identify those hands, and you may well have some answers.

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