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Path Dependence Through Structural Constraints: A Theory of Coup Recurrence in West Africa

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Introduction

In the wee hours of the morning on January 13, 1963, the Togolese President Sylvanus Olympio was shot to death outside the American embassy. Angered by reduced military expenditures, "unemployed Kabré veterans of French colonial forces" propelled the coup (Decalo 1990, 213), ending legitimate civilian rule in three-year-old Togo until 1979 (Bureau of African Affairs 2009). This marked the first coup d'état in the history of post-colonial West Africa (Skinner 2020, 376), inaugurating a tradition that would snake through the region like a red skein. In 1967, Togo experienced another coup, solidifying military rule under Étienne Eyadéma, the man who supposedly murdered Olympio four years prior (Skinner 2020, 381).

Coup d'êtats cascaded through the African continent during the years after independence, with coup plotters toppling governments like dominoes. They became "the functional equivalent of elections," being "virtually the sole manner of ousting incumbent political leaders" (Decalo 1990, 2). Africa quickly became the global hub of coups, witnessing a staggering 220 attempts since 1950, 109 of which were successful (Duzor and Williamson 2023). These illegal seizures of power initiated vicious cycles—Dahl and Gleditsch find that coups "increase the likelihood of new coups," with "less than 70 percent of coup leaders" retaining power after a year (Dahl and Gleditsch 2023, 1020). Beyond the obvious risks of democratic backsliding, coups can cause significant bloodshed—one might cite the 1966 coup that caused the Nigerian Civil War (Kirk-Greene et al. 2025) or the 1979 coup that claimed 400 lives in Equatorial Guinea (Baynham 69, 80).

This is not merely a historical phenomenon. There has been a concerning resurgence of coups in the last decade, particularly in West Africa (Akinola 2024, 1). Since 2019, there have been nine successful military coups in Africa, with most of them occurring in West Africa (Vines

2024). This is not suprising; while "all African regions have experienced coups," they have long been concentrated in the continent's Western countries (McGowan 2003, 339). In light of recent events, scholars and policymakers must continue to study West African coup-making before the incipient crisis escalates any further. In this pursuit, I explore the following question: why do coups recur in so many West African countries?

To contribute to this analysis, I will theorize why coups often recur in afflicted countries through a study of the West African context. My theory of coup recurrence is rooted in the interdisciplinary tradition of path dependency. Path dependence theorists posit that the initial choices decision-makers take become institutionalized, making it difficult for future generations to deviate from inefficient paths (Pierson 2000). I argue that the occurrence of a successful coup introduces structural conditions that incentivize political actors to make decisions that perpetuate coup-making, instigating a vicious cycle of political instability. In other words, coups beget coups.

To construct my theory of coup recurrence, this paper will proceed in the following sections. First, in the literature review, I will define coup d'états and review their historical prevalence in West Africa. Then, I will explain path dependency theory and demonstrate how scholars have used path dependent arguments to explain African coup dynamics in the past. Finally, I will present my theory of coup recurrence: path dependency through structural constraints. This theory contributes to the existing literature by pairing the argument of path dependency with a Downsian argument of rational self-interest: the structural conditions introduced by the incidence of a successful coup incentivize political actors interested in gaining or maintaining power to make decisions that increase the likelihood of another coup occurring. I will test my theory through a case study analysis of post-independence coups in two West

African countries: Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Finally, I will conclude with an analysis of 21st-century coups in West Africa, followed by a discussion of my results and their broader implications.

Literature Review

Defining the Coup D'État

The persisting historical relevance of coups has necessitated a rich scholarship, spawning numerous definitions. For instance, Edward Luttwak defines coups as "a special form of politics that requires guns as an aid to persuasion, although *coups* rarely succeed if guns are much used and fail totally if the situation degenerates into civil war—the polar opposite of the swift and bloodless *coup d'etat*" (Luttwak 2016, *xvi*). This definition establishes the distinction between a coup and a civil war; as Luttwak observes, a coup is executed behind the barrel of a gun, but the coup-plotter need not pull the trigger. On the contrary, the coup-plotter aimes to seize power with the threat of violence alone, hoping to avoid a civil war that would risk his life and claim to power.

However, my analysis focuses on the recurrence of coups, not on the occurrence of violence during a coup. To that end, the event of a coup can hardly be considered "special" in post-independence West Africa, where they were unfortunately commonplace. Therefore, I will employ Powell and Thyne's popular definition: "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive" (Powell and Thyne 252, 11). Most coups in West Africa are plotted by segments of the military, making this definition

contextually relevant. Before unpacking the history of West African coups, however, we must understand the factors contributing to their initial emergence.

Ground Zero for the Coup Epidemic: A Historical Overview

While coups became ubiquitous in post-independence West Africa, they were not always the norm. Chuka Onwumechili explains that coups in traditional African societies were "few and far between," with most civilian administrations exercising decisive control over military forces (Onwumechili 1998, 8). Furthermore, Onwumechili continues that precolonial African societies strove for communal unanimity on essential issues, believing that "community actions could not be relied upon to be effective" without solidarity and agreement (Onwumechili 1998, 8). Though this history merits far more analysis, we can conclude that constrained military power and communal agreement on governance likely limited coup frequency in pre-colonial Africa relative to the post-colonial period. Scholarship explaining African coup occurrence since independence strongly supports this contention; in the following paragraphs, I will outline two prominent issues that post-colonial states faced.

First, post-independence African leaders inherited oppressive, colonial state apparatuses, making them inappropriate tools for effective governance. Onwumechili explains that "the years of autocratic colonial rule left their mark," eroding precolonial democratic norms and breaking up traditional societies into countries "without regard to kinship affiliations," encouraging a continuation of autocracy after independence (Onwumechili 1998, 16). Luttwak corroborates that the first leaders of independent Africa inherited state apparatuses comprised of "army, police, tax collectors, and administrators who had worked for the colonial government," meaning the state's "methods…were those of the imperial power" (Luttwak 2016, *xxv*). Rather than truly shedding

their colonial skin, post-independent states wore the same face behind a different mask. The hand-over of colonial institutions to independent Africa was not a mistake—former imperial powers hoped to emplace state "structures that would continue to service the interest of the metropolis, even after formal political independence," resulting in independent countries "created by colonialism to serve the exploitative agenda of the colonizer" (Mimiko 2024, 7).

These colonial state structures were not designed for effective or equitable governance; they were designed to subjugate native populations to self-interested foreign rule. Therefore, post-colonial governments were "virtually incapable of administering either welfare or security…the raison d'etre, of the modern state" (Mimiko 2024, 8). Oppressed by anachronistic institutions that were more concerned with preserving power and order than promoting societal justice, large swaths of the citizenry supported military intervention in the hope that it would deliver justice (Akinola and Makombe 2024). Tragically, new leaders became playthings of the same noxious influences that plagued the preceding government, laying the groundwork for a cycle of violence and upheaval.

Second, in addition to weak and oppressive state institutions, new African states were populated by disparate, disunified peoples, giving rise to factionalism and ethnic tension. Borders carved up by Europeans dismembered populations, "partitioning groups across international borders," and suffocated others, merging "disparate peoples who lacked a shared political history into artificially large states" (Paine et al. 2025, 18). Inexperienced African leaders were thus dealt the challenge of ruling over disparate (and sometimes warring) groups of people under a nebulous new label of national identity. The separation of some groups and the clobbering together of others undermined nation-state congruence and made independent African countries hotbeds for identitarian conflict. Desperate to preserve order, many African leaders

depended on clientelist networks to retain power, affording patronage to some groups and neglecting others. This further undermined unity and incentivized underprivileged groups (especially in the military) to mount coup attempts (Akinola and Makombe 2024).

The combination of colonial state apparatuses and national disunity left independent Africa with fragile states, fostering power vacuums and alluring pretenses for military upheaval. As Adeoye Akinola and Ratidzo Makombe explain, fragile states host "weak institutions, corruption, economic instability, and social unrest," fueling anti-government sentiments that made it "easier for military actors to exploit power vacuums and justify their intervention to restore political stability" (Akinola and Makombe 2024, 70). A plethora of examples prove how weak state structure and disunity inspired coups in West Africa. For instance, the 1999 Liberian coup and the 1966 Nigerian coup were both driven by "ethnic considerations and conflict" that "divided the military" (Fagbadebo 2024, 37). Similarly, ethnic divisions between the northern Kabré and southern Ewe communities contributed to the 1963 Togolese coup (Kothor 2023). Furthermore, ineffectual civilian governments provided coupists with easy justifications for intervention, such as economic mismanagement or corruption (Nugent 2012, 208). After his takeover of Nigeria in 1984, coupist Major-General Buhari stated, "we have dutifully intervened to save the nation from imminent collapse" (Nugent 2012, 207). Poor governance and country-wide factionalism bred the incentives to mount coups and forged the tools for their successful execution.

Though these issues plagued most African countries—especially those in West Africa—some states avoided the coup trap. Senegal, for example, has never experienced a successful coup since gaining independence in 1960, despite hosting numerous ethnic groups, experiencing separatist violence, and grappling with significant problems in infrastructure and

social service development (Donner et al. 2024, 21). Just like many of its peers, Senegal is a former French colony in West Africa that carries the baggage of ethnic tension and suboptimal governance; however, it did not fall prey to the coup crisis afflicting nearly all of its neighbors. To this end, national fragmentation and poor state formation are important explanatory factors, but they do not tell the whole story about why coups recur in affected countries. In the following sections, I argue that successful coup attempts *themselves* structurally change a country's politics, leading them down a path of repeating history. To do this, I will use the theory of path dependency.

Path Dependence Theory

Path dependence theory has been used to explain phenomena in numerous disciplines, from economics to international relations. Anika Leithner and Kyle Libby define path dependency as the argument that "choices made in the past influence the menu of options available in the present and future" because an "institutionalized" policy is "very difficult to change or reform" (Leithner and Libby 2017). A simple example of path dependency is our continued use of the QWERTY keyboard. Though the design is inefficient and imperfect, the costs of changing course and replacing keyboards are too onerous to pursue (Leithner and Libby 2017). This phenomenon has been termed "increasing returns": the probability of following the same path increases as the "benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time," while the costs of exit rise in tandem, locking actors into the path they initially chose (Pierson 2000, 252).

Though path dependency has conventionally been applied to economics, its use in political science and international relations has increased in recent years. For instance, scholars

have utilized path dependency to analyze international trade or competitive party systems (Leithner and Libby 2017). One of the chief path dependency theorists in IR is Paul Pierson. He explains that "critical junctures or triggering events…set development along a particular path" (Pierson 2000, 263). For my analysis, this "critical juncture" is a country's first coup d'état, which can set it on a path of repeated political upheaval. While there may be a deluge of reasons for *why* a critical juncture occurs, the juncture itself is uniquely important, pushing a country down a path it would not have fallen into otherwise.

Pierson establishes numerous reasons why the increasing returns process associated with path dependence holds unique relevance in political science, highlighting collective action problems, institutional constraints, and the inherent complexity of politics (Pierson 2000, 259). In the following paragraphs, I will reconstruct Pierson's arguments on these issues and briefly explain their relevance to coup occurrence.

First, Pierson explains that collective action problems inherent to politics create dependencies on other actors' actions and increase the costs of changing political institutions. Pierson contends that politics is often "winner-take-all," as "politicians seeking re-election, coup-plotters, and lobbyists either win or lose," with second place meaning very little (Pierson 2000, 258). This creates a positive feedback system that discourages political actors from diverging from the chosen path—"when picking the wrong horse" entails "very high costs, actors must constantly adjust their behavior in the light of how they expect others to act" (Pierson 2000, 258). In other words, political actors must choose who they support in a power struggle very carefully, lest they back the wrong side and risk punishment. Along this line of reasoning, political actors will support projected winners, even if that winner is hazardous for the country at large.

While most path dependency scholars have applied this logic to democratic systems, it can explain coup politics as well. Some may argue that the planning and execution of a coup contradict this argument since it demands collective action; however, Paul Nugent finds that coups are not difficult to execute, merely requiring "a tight-knit group of conspirators who could deploy enough soldiers to arrest key figures, and to take over strategic installations" like "the airports" (Nugent 2012, 208). Initial coups established proof of concept, encouraging dissatisfied soldiers to overthrow unpopular incumbents. Due to the political danger of backing the wrong horse, non-coup plotters in the military are pressured to go along with coupists if it seems likely that the putsch will succeed. Backing an incumbent who may very likely be deposed can result in a litany of consequences, from dismissal to arrest. Indeed, Nugent continues that "when presented with a fait accompli" from coup-plotters, "the rest of the Armed Forces would probably fall in line" (Nugent 2012, 208). With each successful coup, the calculus to align with ambitious coupists rather than defend the status quo increases.

Second, Pierson argues that once political institutions are erected, most people cannot change them, and those in power are incentivized to maintain them. He stipulates that "institutional constraints" in politics "apply to all," as institutional rules are "backed up by force," thereby prohibiting unsatisfied citizenry from exiting the system or pursuing meaningful change (Pierson 2000, 259). Moreover, people begin to invest in established political institutions, learning to profit from them and becoming dependent on them, raising the costs of diverging from the path (Pierson 2000, 259). Some would argue that this logic would prevent coups, since coups cause institutional change. However, coup-making itself can become institutionalized in politics, as it did in West Africa. Just as an American can change the government through the ballot, a West African soldier can back a coup.

To this end, the military may be incentivized to maintain a system of coup-making, as it gives them the freedom to accrue power with impunity. Indeed, after the 1963 Togolese coup, the new government substantially increased military budgets, strengthening the institution's autonomy from the civil state (Decalo 1990). While a democratic system may have one locust of control, many West African states had two, as the civil-military line became increasingly blurred. Not only did this result in compounding institutionalization that increased coup occurrence, but it also left dissatisfied citizens with few alternatives. If most of the military falls in line with well-prepared coup-plotters, civilians and objecting service members have little recourse against the new state. Unless of course they decide to mount a countercoup, which only entrenches the pattern further.

Highlighting the weakness of the body politic, Pierson contends that politics are highly opaque and complex, leaving dissatisfied actors with limited tools for change and inhibiting the historical learning necessary to diverge from established paths (Pierson 2000, 261). Not only are political performance and lines of causality between actions and outcomes hard to measure in politics, but most people are only afforded "crude" instruments to engage with the system, such as sporadic voting (Pierson 2000, 260). Pierson argues that these difficulties encourage the formation of "mental maps," through which communities "come to share and reproduce a similar ideology" (Pierson 2000, 260). The vast majority of coups in West Africa happen with significant popular support (indeed, they are legitimized and empowered by this support) (Hammou 2024), even though coupists consistently fail to improve governance in office and often deliver dismal economic outcomes (Nugent 2012, 261). Pierson's hypothesis can explain the popular support for coupists against ineffectual incumbents: with little recourse against repressive or incompetent governments, the public saw military coups as a dependable and tested

way of ejecting bad leaders. To that end, the coup was the crude weapon wielded by unsatisfied West African populaces, used consistently due to past success, though frequently to no avail.

Path Dependency in Existing Coup Literature

Numerous scholars have analyzed the recurrent nature of coups in West Africa, with many considering the phenomenon "institutionalized" due to repeated occurrence. Using the language of path dependence, Akinola and Makombe argue that the first three African coups "set the tone for military takeovers," with coups becoming an "'institutionalised' method of changing governments on the continent" by the end of the 1960s (Akinola and Makombe 2024, 67). As I have argued, early coups were "critical junctures" that set many African countries on a path of recurring military takeovers for decades. These first coups were especially important to the institutionalization process, as they demonstrated to aspiring coup-plotters that mounting a coup is more than feasible (Nugent 2012, 208).

Given the rampant nature of the coup syndrome in Africa, some scholars consider the phenomenon "contagious." The coup contagion hypothesis argues that successful "military coups in one country" can motivate aspiring coupists across the world, thereby "influenc[ing]…the occurrence of military coups in other countries," even if there is no explicit coordination between conspirators. (Li and Thompson 1975, 64). The contagion effect is likely pronounced in countries sharing the same region and similar historical afflictions, as coup-plotters can use neighboring coupists as a reliable model.

While the coup contagion effect is popular, recent studies cast doubt on the theory's validity. Naunihal Singh reports that interviews he conducted with coup-plotters were not consistent with the contagion hypothesis, as "they [coup-plotters] did not consider such events

relevant to their own calculations, which were focused squarely on domestic factors" (Singh 2022, 75). This makes sense—though coup-plotters may be aware of attempts in other countries and even encouraged by them, this is not reason enough to mount a coup. While successful coups in neighboring countries may be inspiring, coup-plotters will not pursue a conspiracy unless they have the capability and incentive to challenge the incumbent. Indeed, quantitative evidence contradicts the coup contagion effect. By testing eight political events, Miller et al. found little evidence validating coup contagion, arguing that coup-plotters are already educated on potential gains, tactics, and coordination strategies, so "there is little to learn from coups abroad" (Miller et al. 2016, 434).

Although the support for international coup contagion is dubious, I argue that there is much more substantial evidence for domestic coup contagion. In other words, a country that undergoes a coup will likely suffer from another one. The international coup contagion argument is vague, hard to measure, and removed from the relevant countries' unique political and historical contexts. In contrast, a domestic coup contagion argument—one of internal path dependence—posits that coups change the incentive structure of a country's political system in such a way that future coup attempts are more likely. When operating in a political landscape that has suffered a coup, incumbent leaders are afraid of future coups while dissatisfied service members and citizens are inspired by the possibility of a coup. Therefore, coups propagate structural influences that alter political actors' decision-making calculi such that coup attempts occur more frequently. In the following section, I will theorize how and why this happens.

A Theory of Coup Recurrence

In this section, I will explain my theory of coup recurrence. Once a country experiences a coup, its political system structurally changes, leading future generations down a path of repeated coups. To construct this argument of structural constraints, I draw from Anthony Downs' theory that political actors in democratic systems make decisions calculated to win elections. Applying this theory to the non-democratic coup context, I contend that the *possibility* of a coup introduces structural influences that incentivize the competing actors of potential coup-plotters and incumbents to make rational decisions grounded in either gaining power or maintaining power. Then, I explain how these decisions perpetuate the kind of political instability that causes coups to occur. In order to elucidate this argument, I will analyze the battleground between coup-plotters and incumbents by describing the decision-making calculus of both sides.

Rational Choice Applied to Coup-Plotting

Many theories explain how structural factors influence political behavior, especially in the democratic context. Most notably, Anthony Downs argued that political actors in a democratic system are self-interested individuals motivated by winning the next election, behaving like "entrepreneurs selling policies for votes instead of products for money" (Downs 1957, 137). Downs paints democratic politics as a rational battle between the incumbent and opposition parties over the prize of electoral success; inefficient or harmful policymaking is, therefore, not a result of irrationality but a byproduct of self-interested, rational competition (Downs 1957). Structural constraints could incentivize political actors to pass policy or take action that hurts the masses, even in a democracy. In an electoral college system like the US, for

instance, incumbents and challengers may be incentivized to forward a policy that benefits only a handful of swing states, even if that policy is unimportant or unpopular amongst most other voters.

Though it was used exclusively for democratic contexts, Downs's argument about rational competition over political power can also apply to coup-afflicted West Africa. When outlining the rules of democracy, Downs explains that "the incumbent party cannot in any way restrict the political freedom of opposition parties or of individual citizens, unless they seek to overthrow it by force" (Downs 1957, 137). Here lies the most radical difference between a democratic political competition and a coupist political competition: in the coup context, the challenger is necessarily trying to overthrow the incumbent by force. Perhaps even Downs would have forgiven the dictatorial nature of West African incumbents who constantly lived in fear of the next coup. Though these systems are markedly different, there are a few important similarities: both systems host three players (the incumbent, the challenger, and the governed); the competing political actors have the same interest of winning or preserving power; and the system structurally influences political behavior.

Coup-plotters, who take on the role of "opposition," are incentivized to capture the sentiments of the masses in their pursuit of power. To be clear, coup-plotters are not necessarily acting for the general good; as Samuel Decalo finds, they are often motivated by personal scruples or grudges (Decalo 1990). However, coup-plotters capitalize on public anger against the incumbent to justify their coup and establish regime credibility afterward. Just as "the strategies of opposition parties depend on their views of the voters' utility incomes from government activity" in a democracy (Downs 1957, 138), West African coup-plotters utilize "social discontent" to overthrow sitting leaders, pointing to grievances ranging from corruption to

incompetency (Omilusi 2024, 141). Indeed, there is a high correlation between high protest activity and coup attempts (Johnson and Thyne 2016, 2). To this end, protests are "signals of government illegitimacy" that "increase the perceived likelihood that a coup will be successful" (Johnson and Thyne 2016, 5).

Seizing power through popular discontent, rational coup-plotters hoping to preserve power will often purge elites from the previous administration (Dahl and Gleditsch 2023, 1020) and implement (some) institutional change (Bennett et al. 2021, 628). For instance, after the 1984 Guinean coup, coup-plotters declared that they ended a "bloody and ruthless dictatorship," immediately releasing political prisoners and claiming they would lay the groundwork for "true democracy" (Reuters 1984). These efforts paint coup-plotters as military guardians who save the country from malign incumbents, creating a path dependent effect in which the disgruntled masses consistently embrace coups as an acceptable method for political change and reform. Indeed, there is high public trust in the military throughout Africa, including a recent poll showing 62% public trust in the Malian military (Hatungimana 2025, 7). Unfortunately, coup-plotters' lofty promises almost always fall short, as successful coup leaders are incentivized to behave like their predecessors once they assume power.

Incumbents, fearful of potential coup-plotters and hoping to maintain regime stability, are incentivized to pursue defensive measures. In the conventional literature, these are called coup-proofing or counterbalancing measures (Brome 2018, Reiter 2017, Jin 2024). There are a plethora of coup-proofing measures that incumbents pursue; to list a few, they can hire and fire officers based on political reliability, create regiments dedicated to protecting the president, foster divisions within the military, or privilege soldiers from certain ethnic groups (Harkness 2021, Reiter 2017). Though coup-proofing measures can decrease military effectiveness, Erica

DeBruin explains that "for individual leaders, the decision to prioritize coup prevention is a rational one," due to the personal hazards of being removed by coup (e.g. death or exile) and the lower probability of "international conflict" (DeBruin 2020, 1). This is especially true in West Africa, where coups became the most common form of power transition (Nugent 2012). Accordingly, many West African leaders attempted to coup-proof their regimes; for instance, Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah established and directly commanded the President's Own Guard Regiment (POGR) and Togolese president Gnassingbé Eyadéma stacked the military with soldiers hailing from the Kabré ethnic group (Agyekum 2021, Morency-LaFlamme 2020). While coup-proofing measures can decrease coup success, they do not decrease coup occurrence; in fact, DeBruin finds that creating a counterbalancing force increases the "risk of coups in the following years" (DeBruin 2018, 1452).

In a twist of irony, incumbents' efforts to coup-proof their regimes can bolster discontent and cement the tradition of coup-plotting. To illustrate this point, I will examine two methods of coup-proofing: counterbalancing regiments (e.g., Nkrumah's POGR) and ethnic stacking (e.g., Kabré dominance of the Togolese armed forces).

When incumbents create presidential guard regiments to counterbalance against the threat of coups, they may alienate or frustrate segments of the armed forces by "challeng[ing] the institutional interests of the military" (DeBruin 2018, 1436), thereby emboldening coup-plotters. This is because incumbents may privilege counterbalancing regiments over other segments of the armed forces and threaten the military's autonomy. For example, Nkrumah's POGR was "lavishly equipped at the expense of the needs of the regular army," fueling civil-military tensions that sowed the seeds for an eventual coup against Nkrumah (Agyekum 2021, 922). Similarly, the Nigerian "military intervened to disband President Ibrahim Babangida's new

National Guard force" just a year after its creation (DeBruin 2018, 1439). Furthermore, incumbents relying on counterbalancing units are effectively at the mercy of their guards, leaving them vulnerable to palace coups. When President Mohamed Bazoum of Niger planned to reorganize his presidential guard, his supposed protectors launched a successful coup against him (Engels 2023).

Therefore, even effective counterbalancing units can generate enough discontent to spawn persistent coup threats. For example, incumbents can stack their armed forces with specific ethnic groups or exclude others to saturate the military with loyalists; however, this strategy foments anger from othered and underprivileged segments of the military. Ethnic stacking is a particularly salient coup-proofing strategy in West Africa, given the region's rich ethnic diversity. Togo, for example, is home to "37 tribal groups that speak one of 39 languages and share little in the way of a common culture or history" (Morin 2013). This multiculturality results in great camaraderie among fellow kinsmen but equally strong suspicion against the other. It is no wonder that around 60-70% of West African leaders engaged in ethnic stacking during the 1970s-80s—a period that marked the zenith of coup activity (Harkness 2021, 9).

Pursuing a strategy of ethnic stacking will surely net an incumbent loyalty and support from the in-group; however, it will concomitantly foster bitterness, disloyalty, and motivations to defect among the out-group (Morency-Laflamme and McLauchlin 2020). Kristen Harkness explains that soldiers in the out-group are "faced with a shrinking window of opportunity to reverse their fortunes," increasing the likelihood of coup occurrence (Harkness 2016, 594). Even if coup-plotters remove an incumbent utilizing this strategy, however, ethnic lines may have already become cemented in the military politics of the country, commencing a "cycle of tightly linked reactionary and counter reactionary violence…an ethnic coup trap" (Harkness 2016, 594).

It becomes increasingly difficult to break out of such a cycle, where officers only trust their coethnics and connive against the other. Harkness invokes the language of path dependence in her argument, explaining that African leaders who pursue ethnic stacking "initiate violent cycles of ethnic coups and countercoups as officers resisted discrimination…Such countries experienced coups roughly four times as often as their counterparts" (Harkness 2016, 588). Indeed, West African countries that undergo ethnic coups tend to experience many of the same sorts: Ewe and Northern officers launched coups in Ghana; Creole, Mende, Northern, and Temne officers launched coups in Sierra Leone; and Ewe and Kabré officers launched coups in Togo (Bodea and Houle 2021).

Incumbent leaders in coup-ridden countries sensibly fear future coups. However, their defense strategies inaugurate increasing returns processes that make it compoundingly difficult to remedy the political issues that produce coups in the first place. Indeed, coup-proofing strategies disempower and embitter large swaths of the military, creating strong incentives to pursue regime change. However, the more coup attempts there are—successful or otherwise—the more frightened incumbents become, meaning the incentives to coup-proof never dissipate. Furthermore, coup-proofing strategies can establish clientelist or patronage networks that beneficiaries do not want to undo. When leaders privilege certain ethnicities or disproportionately reward presidential guard regiments, those entities may remain powerful even after the incumbent's removal; at the very least, they will not be deprived of their thirst for political power. In this way, coup-proofing strategies create winners and losers, with winners clinging to power and losers chasing after it. After a coup, the winners and losers swap places, and the pernicious system causing the instability has dug its nails further into the political skin of the country.

The Battle Between Coup-Plotters and Incumbents

To further understand the structural influences that coups introduce to a country's political landscape, one must analyze the coup battleground. This battleground includes two key players: the coup plotter and the incumbent. In this section, I will review the decision-making calculus of both players.

The Coup Plotter's Decision-Making Calculus

Many scholars have analyzed the coupists' capacity to usurp the incumbent and their incentives for doing so to understand the decision-making of aspiring coup-plotters. Dubbed "plotter capacity and plotter disposition" by Curtis Bell and Jun Koga Sudduth (Bell and Sudduth 2015), coup analysts argue that factors influencing the material capability and underlying motivation to mount coups affect the likelihood of their occurrence and success (Bell and Sudduth 2015; Belkin and Schofer 2003; Powell 2012; Johnson and Thyne 2016). Put differently, plotter capacity and disposition affect the coup plotters' and the incumbent's willingness to engage in a protracted struggle against one another.

According to Bell and Sudduth, "plotter capacity" refers to the "conditions that lead potential coup plotters to perceive" coup attempts as viable and likely to succeed (Bell and Sudduth 2015). Scholars have identified various conditions that enhance plotter capacity, including the extent of military capabilities (Powell 2012; Lachapelle 2020), the military rank of the coup plotters (Bell and Sudduth 2015; Ohl and Finkel 2014), and the level of popular discontent against the regime (Lindberg and Clark 2008). For example, Dorothy Ohl and Evgeny Finkel find that coups initiated by generals are "more likely to succeed" because of their political connections, knowledge, and "access to key facilities" (Ohl and Finkel 2014). Existing research confirms the salience of plotter capacity to coup violence, with De Bruin finding that coups

"staged by junior officers and enlisted men were more likely to turn violent" because their relative lack of knowledge and resources inhibits their ability to accurately predict the likelihood of coup success (De Bruin 2019). While plotter capacity certainly influences the outcomes of a coup, plotter disposition—or the factors that motivate conspiracy against the incumbent—are also crucial to the equation.

Plotter disposition, or the dissatisfaction with the incumbent that leaves "potential plotters favorably disposed toward coup activity" (Bell and Sudduth 15), depends on several factors. Bell and Sudduth find that ongoing civil war increases plotter disposition (Bell and Sudduth 2015), while other scholars point to internal military politics (Ohl and Finkel 2014) or the length of time the incumbent has spent in office (Albrecht 2014; Akinola 2024). Factors of plotter capacity and plotter disposition can often be at odds. For example, Ohl and Finkel suggest that middle-ranking officers would have the greatest disposition to launch coups due to their proximity to elite status in the military. However, most coups are initiated by generals, as they have a greater capacity to succeed (Ohl and Finkel 2014). Nevertheless, some coups are launched by junior officers, such as the 1966 coup in Nigeria (Daly 2024), despite the lower capacity for success. In such scenarios, coup plotters' disposition against the incumbent may outweigh concerns of capacity. Do such risky coups occur because of the coup-plotters' vitriol against the current regime? Along this line of thinking, how does the regime's behavior influence plotter disposition and capacity? These queries compel us to examine the incumbent's side of this power struggle.

The Incumbent's Defense

In this complex game of power and leverage, incumbent regimes employ their own strategies and tactics to deter or defeat potential coup plotters. Here, we must return to the discussion of incumbent coup-proofing. To reiterate, leaders have historically implemented a

plethora of coup-proofing strategies. Leaders like Bashar al-Assad have used ethnic stacking by "recruiting and promoting members of certain communal groups seen as more loyal" to the regime (Morency-Laflamme and McLauchlin 2020). Other leaders have sacrificed "organizational effectiveness" in the military to prioritize regime protection, staging rival factions against each other and executing potential challengers (Belkin and Schofer 2003). One might also recall the counterbalancing strategy, which is accomplished by establishing an independent, non-military security force loyal to the incumbent, "such as Kwame Nkrumah's President's Own Guard" (De Bruin 2017). These coup-proofing efforts aim to deter and thwart coup attempts by manipulating the capacity of coup plotters (e.g., executing generals with the wherewithal to stage successful coups) and complicating their disposition to commit coups (e.g., stacking the military with regime loyalists). While these policies may insulate incumbents from successful coups, they create friction between the regime and the military. De Bruin corroborates that forming counterbalancing units reduces the "success rate of coup attempts," but "increases the odds of a coup in the following year" (De Bruin 2017). Evidently, a confluence of factors affects the staging of coups, ranging from the whims of powerful generals to the incumbent's ethnic background. I isolate two specific variables that are especially useful to understanding this power struggle.

First, a preponderance of successful coups enjoy popular support, making public sentiment a principal aspect of coup plotter capacity to study further. While innumerable circumstances motivate coup plotting, Paul Nugent explains that "after four decades of military coups [in Africa]…one can conclude that…the unpopularity of the incumbent regime provided the backdrop against which the soldiers felt empowered to act. Although military conspirators could technically overthrow a legitimate regime, they were much less likely to do so because

they could not be assured a measure of popular support" (Nugent 2012, 208). Salah Ben Hammou corroborates that among 242 successful coups in 75 year period, 189 (or ~80%) "saw some type of civilian support" (Hammou 2024). Due to its ubiquity in the history of African military intervention, the extent of civilian support for coups is pivotal to understanding coup recurrence. Since coups closely follow public outrage against the incumbent, the masses begin to view coup-plotters as saviors who will swoop in to save the country from incompetent leaders. This results in a cycle where publics perceive coups as the only solution to destructive leaders. If the next leader also fails, the public invites another coup, assuming that anything would be better than the status quo. Unfortunately, the possibility of a coup compels incumbents to implement self-interested policies at the country's expense, ironically inviting the very public outrage that precipitates most coups.

Second, the literature suggests that the incumbent government's defensive coup-proofing mechanisms can help its survive coup attempts at the cost of emboldening would-be coup-plotters. As stated earlier, coup-proofing efforts can alienate or anger segments of the military by privileging the few at the expense of the many, thereby increasing coup-plotter disposition against the incumbent. At the same time, effective coup-proofing can substantially reduce coup-plotter capacity to mount coups successfully. The nature and efficacy of coup-proofing efforts vary widely; for example, leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, utilized small, elite guards, while others "depend on larger but more poorly trained and equipped civilian militia" (De Bruin 2020, 2). Incumbents strive to develop coup-proofing measures that "deter potential plotters from attempting to seize power in the first place" (De Bruin 2020, 3). If coup-plotters pursue conspiracies in spite of coup-proofing measures because of high confidence, high plotter-disposition, or miscalculation, the battle for power can turn bloody. For instance,

coup plotters were not deterred by incumbent counterbalancing forces in coups against Presidents Kwame Nkruhmah of Ghana or Apollo Obote of Uganda (Nugent 2012, 211). Conversely, incumbents that abstain from coup-proofing their regime could be caught unawares by coup plotters due to a lack of reliable information or protection. This is because incumbent coup-proofing is not, by any means, the only reason for coup making or the only source of discontent in a country. Therefore, an incumbent that does not coup-proof their regime may still experience coup attempts during times of instability, leaving them highly vulnerable. Thus, West African leaders face powerful incentives for coup-proofing: if coup attempts are probable, one ought to prepare.

Based on a survey of the existing literature, it is clear that the interplay between ambitious coup-plotters and cautious incumbents determines the likelihood and nature of coup occurrence. Coup-plotters mount coups based on their personal grievances against the incumbent and their capacity to get away with conspiracy. Oftentimes, this plotter-capacity arises from popular outrage against the incumbent. Fearing meddling officers, incumbents implement preventative coup-proofing measures, which thwart coup attempts while bolstering plotter-disposition to displace the government by alienating segments of the military. In the following section, I will conduct case study analyses to examine this vicious cycle of coupmaking.

Methodology

Hypothesis and Study Design

In conversation with path dependence theory and the conventional literature on coup d'états, I hypothesize that the occurrence of a coup structurally transforms a country's politics by incentivizing power-seeking political actors to pursue strategies that perpetuate instability, thereby causing future coups. Put differently, the possibility of a coup incites a recurring battle between potential coup plotters and the incumbent—a battle that cyclically produces instability. Therefore, a coup can mark a critical juncture in a country's history, setting it on a path that begets more of the same political insecurity. This path dependence is a byproduct of an increasing returns process—pursuing the same strategy becomes easier than exiting the path. In the coup context, increasing returns processes are legible through popular support for coups and incumbent coup-proofing strategies. Afforded few tools for political change, the public often demonstrates against the incumbent and accepts coup-making, viewing it as a dependable method for political change. Incumbents, fearing coup-plotters, pursue coup-proofing strategies that inadvertently create the preconditions for future coup attempts, culminating in a vicious cycle.

Using the variables of political support and incumbent defense, I will test my hypothesis through a case study analysis of selected coups from West Africa. My studies will be limited to West Africa to control for vast regional, historical, and governmental differences. Furthermore, coups are historically salient in West Africa, hosting the "largest share of coups" worldwide (Cebotari et al. 7). With the recent resurgence of successful coups in West Africa, the issue is temporally relevant in this region (Vines 2024). I will use a qualitative, case study approach to

conduct my research. To establish controls, I will only compare coups that occurred in former French colonies in West Africa within ten years of one another. My case studies will analyze two coups from Burkina Faso/Upper Volta (the 1980 Upper Voltan Coup and the 1987 Burkinabé coup) and two coups from Mauritania (the 1978 Mauritanian and the 1984 Mauritanian coup). After concluding my case study section, I will analyze the results in light of coups that have occurred in West Africa during the 21st century.

Coup d'états have been closely studied by innumerable historians and political scientists, especially in the African context. However, the record of why they are endemic to the West African region is incomplete. Though many scholars have already analyzed historical preconditions or theorized about international coup contagion, there has been little analysis of how this contagion effect works on a domestic level. My analysis will suggest that if there is a contagion effect, it is not a disease of madness, but a rational byproduct of perverse incentives created by the historical trauma of past coups. This study will greatly contribute to the theoretical framework of path dependence and the historical understanding of why coups beget coups.

Case Study: Upper Volta/Burkina Faso

My first case study will concern two coups that occurred in Upper Volta/Burkina Faso during the 1980s: the 1980 coup led by Colonel Saye Zerbo against the incumbent President Sangoulé Lamizana, and the 1987 coup led by Captain Blaisé Campoaré against President Thomas Sankara. Both coups were led by senior military officers against incumbents who also entered executive office through a military coup. This means that in both cases, the putschists had high plotter-capacity and operated in a political landscape that was already shaped by coup

occurrence. The consistency in context, space, and time of these coups helps account for extraneous variables.

Before examining the relevant coups, it is important to establish a historical background of Upper Volta/Burkina Faso, a country that has long been ravaged by coup d'états. Indeed, there have been seven successful coups in Burkina Faso post-independence, with the most recent occurring in 2022 (Africanews 2024). Initially called Upper Volta, Burkina Faso gained independence in 1960 under President Maurice Yaméogo "and his party, the Union Démocratique Voltaïque" (Eizenga 2021, 3). However, his politically repressive policies and attacks against traditional Mossi chiefs caused trade union strikes and protests, eventually culminating in a 1966 military coup that placed Colonel Sangoulé Lamizana in power. Though he would stay in power until 1980, the 1966 coup established a pattern of military power grabs, resulting in four coups during the 1980s alone (Eizenga 2021). The variables of popular resistance and incumbent defense are salient throughout this history.

First, popular resistance against the regime consistently played a role in laying the groundwork for coups in Burkina Faso, most frequently expressed through union mobilization. Astonishingly, trade unions have "been the vanguard in every significant political protest since the nation's birth," battling the first six Burkinabé governments and decisively winning each war (Phelan et al. 2018, 62). Though the country's many unions are not always aligned, they "overcome ideological and organizational differences when faced with a crisis" threatening their common interests and autonomy, allowing the unions to mobilize thousands through the pulpit of the masses (Phelan et al. 2018, 65). The unique power of unions to foster mass unrest makes the popular resistance variable both relevant and measurable.

Second, incumbent leaders in Burkina Faso are acutely aware of coup risks, with each possessing different strategies to protect their power. The strategies vary based on the given incumbent: President Yaméogo used security forces against challengers and dissidents; President Lamizana suspended the constitution in response to political unrest; President Zerbo attacked unruly factions in the military; President Campoaré privileged a separate military wing created to support his power (Eizenga 2021). While strategies differed based on the given leader, their defense mechanisms affected the decision-making calculi of coup plotters—and subsequently, the occurrence and outcome of each coup.

The 1980 Upper Voltan Coup

On November 25, 1980, Colonel Saye Zerbo successfully led a bloodless coup against the incumbent, President Aboubakar Sangoulé Lamizana (McFarland and Rupley 1998). Lamizana himself had taken power through a coup he led against President Maurice Yaméogo in 1966, inaugurating a tradition of military coups in Upper Volta (Arnold 2025). President Lamizana fostered serious political tumult, unilaterally suspending the National Assembly, his cabinet, and the constitution in 1974 (Arnold 2025). Leading up to 1980, conditions were ripe for anti-incumbent conspiracy, with protests and strikes demanding wage increases raging across the country (McFarland and Rupley 1998). These realities increased coup-plotter capacity and gave rise to Col. Zerbo's seizure of power, after which he suspended the 1977 Constitution and established the Comité Militaire de Redressement Pour le Progrès National (CMPRN) (McFarland and Rupley 1998). Zerbo's rule was also short-lived, ending in a bloody military coup in 1982. In the following sections, I will analyze the role of popular support and incumbent defense in causing the 1980 coup in Upper Volta.

Popular Support

There was glaring popular discontent in Upper Volta in the years leading up to the 1980 coup. National issues were fomented by the Sahelian drought of 1968-1974, which especially damaged northern Upper Volta and stirred anger among the refugee Tuareg community (McFarland and Rupley 1998). Political conditions were also dire, with President Lamizana reneging on his promises to return to civilian rule and moving to ban political parties in 1974 (McFarland and Rupley 1998). Responding to the dismal conditions, trade unions launched a three-month general strike in 1975, crippling Lamizana's government and compelling him to "dissolve his government" and "increase in civilian ministers" (McFarland and Rupley 1998, 86). Trade unions have long been influential in Upper Voltan/Burkinabé politics, helping trigger the 1966 coup that put Lamizana in office to begin with (McFarland and Rupley 1998, 86).

Though Lamizana tried to re-civilianize the government and won his next term in office through elections, protests continued, including a national teacher's strike in 1976 and a "major labor union" strike in February of 1979 (McFarland and Rupley 1998, 88), paving the way for the coup. After this point, strikes only continued in severity. When two labor union leaders were arrested in late May of 1979, "weeklong protest strikes" forced the government to acquiesce to public demands and release the leaders. In January of 1980, a union general strike closed "most public services," and an October teacher's strike "became a general strike in early November," forcing the government to further submit to demands (McFarland and Rupley 1998, 90). Three days after this final embarrassment, Saye Zerbo ultimately deposed Lamizana, empowered by public discontent and the incumbent's consistent failures (McFarland and Rupley 1998). Indeed, Zerbo "awarded teachers most of their October and November demands" just a week after gaining power (though his sympathy toward unions would quickly wane) (McFarland and Rupley 1998, 92). Public discontent helped justify Zerbo's coup and impelled others to fall in

line, while simultaneously weakening Lamizana's government and its ability to impose national control, reducing the difficulty associated with illegally seizing power. To ensure regime legitimacy afterward, Zerbo made sure to reward the segments of the public that helped justify his putsch. Thus, the combined effect of support for regime change and a weakened incumbent set the stage for a coup.

Incumbent Defense

Though Lamizana tried to consolidate power early in his regime, his attempts to civilianize the government weakened his defense against coup-plotters. During the 1980 Upper Voltan coup, a counter-coup effort was launched by "the riot police on behalf of Lamizana," but it failed and caused no casualties (McFarland and Rupley 1998, 92). Lamizana's inability to defend his position in power was likely a result of his demilitarization of the regime. As Paul Nugent explains, Lamizana was a caretaker military leader who intended to return the country to civilian rule as soon as possible (Nugent 2012, 213). Indeed, Lamizana lifted his ban on political parties and established a democratic constitution in 1977, entering office as a civilian in 1978 (McFarland and Rupley 1998). De Bruin explains that civilian leaders have worse access to information about coup-plotters in the military (De Bruin 2019), which could have contributed to the swift defeat of Lamizana's counterbalancing forces. Overall, Lamizana's weak counterbalancing force—the riot police—resulted in the execution of a quick and bloodless coup. Lamizana's vulnerability, caused by his attempts to re-civilianize and his lack of coup-proofing, may have also served as a warning for future Burkinabé leaders—my proceeding analysis of the country supports this inference.

1987 Upper Voltan Coup

On October 15, 1987, Captain Blaisé Campaoré led a group of coup-plotters to kill his boss and childhood friend, Thomas Sankara (Brooke 1987). A self-proclaimed Marxist, Sankara came into power through a military putsch on August 4, 1983, which the public backed (Botchway and Traore 2021). Throughout his presidency, Sankara championed "agricultural self-sufficiency, economic populism, meaningful independence from France, women's rights, environmentalism and other reforms," making him popular at home and across Africa (Phelan et al. 2018, 63). However, his revolutionary agenda earned him many enemies, including powerful trade unions and the French government, resulting in pooling support for Campaoré (Jaffré 2018). This culminated in the shocking assassination of Sankara, which took the lives of the radical president and 12 of his entourage (Brooke 1987).

Popular Support

Compared to figures like President Lamizana, Sankara enjoyed significant popular support from many segments of the population. To this day, Sankara is celebrated as a "near-mythical hero for many young people in his country and across Africa," with thousands regularly visiting his gravesite on the anniversary of his death (Harsch 2013, 358). Sankara instilled in his people a "strong sense of pride in their African identity," renaming the country to Burkina Faso and spearheading politically controversial but widely popular anti-imperialist, anti-French, and anti-corruption positions (Harsch 2013, 364). He specifically targeted IMF structural adjustment—the "target of popular protest"—and improved access to education for tens of thousands of people (Zeilig 2018, 54). In Sankara's Burkina Faso, "ministers were no longer overlords and gods, living in the dizzying heights of luxury," but instead "received modest

wages, while basic health and education was delivered to the poor" (Zeilig 2018, 56).

Nevertheless, Sankara also accrued many powerful adversaries in pursuing revolutionary change.

Though he was widely celebrated, Sankara earned the ire of the mighty Burkinabé

unions, which hurt his popularity. Like military leaders before him, Sankara waged war against

trade unions by implementing "revolutionary committees" called CDRs in workplaces to limit

union autonomy (Phelan et al. 2018, 64). It is hard to overstate the influence of trade unions in

Burkina Faso. Though they were "small in numbers," they were enormously influential because

of their presence in important public sector enterprises like education and their role in the

independence movement (Phelan et al. 2018, 64). Indeed, it was largely thanks to the trade

unions that Sankara even entered office in 1983 (Phelan et al. 2018, 64). Perhaps Sankara's

greatest blunder vis à vis trade unions was his arrest of SNEAHV[1] leaders and the "mass sacking

of 1380 teachers in March 1984"; though SNEAHV was hugely unpopular with other unions,

Sankara's attack "unified the only force capable of challenging his one-party rule" (Phelan et al.

2018, 68). Growing union discontent with Sankara resulted in growing support for the to-be

coupist Blaisé Campaoré, who "became convinced that a coup would succeed" and

unsurprisingly re-employed fired teachers and released "all trade unionists from prison" after

taking power (Phelan et al. 2018, 70)—a quid pro quo act reminiscent of Saye Zerbo's

acquiescence to teachers' demands. Tacit union support for Campoaré likely played a role in

facilitating a relatively stable regime transition, despite Sankara's popularity and the shocking

nature of his assassination. The other side of the coin was Campoaré's consolidation of power

and suppression of protest (even mentioning Sankara was "virtually taboo in Burkina Faso for

years after his death") (Harsch 2013, 359), supporting the importance of incumbent defense

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[1] A powerful teachers' union

mechanisms against threats to the regime. Indeed, Sankara's negligence of such defenses left him vulnerable to being overthrown.

Incumbent Resistance

Since all of the blood spilled during the 1987 coup stained the proverbial palace floor, some may look to incumbent counterbalancing measures to explain the violence. Though Sankara's assassination is still shrouded in mystery (Jaffré 2018, 109), first-hand accounts from the only survivor of the event and 2015 autopsy results reveal that "he had indeed been assassinated while holding up his arms," after which coup plotters fired at his entourage (Jaffré 2018, 96). Why, however, were Sankara and his men shot instead of arrested? As DeBruin explains, coup plotters generally prefer to avoid violent attempts because of the associated reputational damage, "loss of life, damage to property, and infrastructure," which is why coups can proceed bloodlessly if there is no incumbent resistance (De Bruin 2020, 7). A possible explanation could be that the coup plotters' anticipated resistance when planning the coup, a claim that I will analyze in the following paragraphs.

While Sankara did not establish standard counterbalancing measures to protect his regime, the political factionalization of the Burkinabé military affected the decision-making calculus of the aggressive coup plotters. According to Ernest Harsch, Sankara only maintained modest personal security, leaving him without a cadre of men ready to counter a coup (Harsch 2010). Although this explains Sankara's vulnerability, it again begs the question of why the coup was so violent. The answer may lie in the politicized military of Sankara's regime: though there was considerable cohesion in the Burkinabé military before and shortly after independence, political factionalism fomented after the 1980 coup of President Lamizana (Eizenga 2021). Saye Zerbo led conservative factions of the military, who "feared a leftist takeover" due to union

activity, to oust Lamizana, but failed to contain leftist military factions, resulting in increasing fragmentation (Eizenga 2021, 5). Eventually, two conservative factions removed Zerbo from power in 1982 and united against the young, leftist faction led by Thomas Sankara (Eizenga 2021). The newly appointed conservative president Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo jailed Sankara in an attempt to stymie this radicalism; in a catastrophic backfire, students protested and leftist soldiers mutinied (ironically led by Campoaré), resulting in Sankara's release and eventual ascension to the presidency (Eizenga 2021). Having co-authored this history, Campoaré knew that Sankara would pose a greater threat to his power alive than dead. If he was simply jailed, a charismatic Sankara could provoke his supporters in the military to mutiny or otherwise rebel, leaving Campoaré vulnerable to failure or a future coup, just as it had happened to Ouédraogo. To this end, military factionalism afforded Sankara an empirically proven, latent counterbalancing force, even if he did not formally enshrine one. Campoaré and his conspirators nipped this problem in the bud by assassinating Sankara and nearly all eye-witnesses, leaving Sankara loyalists no leader to mutiny for, incentivizing them to fall in line; remaining Sankarists were duly eliminated (Eizenga 2021).

Though Sankara's "counterbalancing" was latent and clearly flawed, it informed the coup plotters' decision to use violence and inspired Campoaré's policy changes in office. Unlike other military leaders, Sankara had no counterbalancing force on the payroll. However, his deft use of ideology and his revolutionary credentials offered him powerful support in a country dominated by a politically factionalized military. Indeed, his supporters in the military freed and empowered him in the early 1980s, deeply impacting Campoaré's decision to assassinate an unarmed former comrade and friend instead of simply arresting him. Therefore, incumbent counterbalancing, even if latent, can provoke coup plots. Furthermore, Campoaré learned from Sankara's

vulnerability, moving to unify ideological factions in the military and creating an explicit counterbalancing force called the Regiment of Presidential Security (RSP) once in office (Eizenga 2021; Brett 2021). This force, though effective, would embitter segments of the military and inspire future coup attempts (Harsch 2021), reinforcing Burkina Faso's tradition of coup-plotting.

Case Study: Mauritania

My second case study concerns Mauritania, another former French colony that experienced recurring coups from the late 1970s to as recent as 2008 (N'Diaye 2020). In this section, I will analyze the 1978 and 1984 coups. In both coups, the chief conspirators were Mauritanian colonels, and all political actors involved—including coup-plotters and incumbents—were Arab-Berbers (N'Diaye 2017). Before analyzing the cases, I will review Mauritania's post-independence history.

Mauritania suffered from many familiar post-colonial challenges that laid the foundation for endemic political instability. Gaining independence in 1960, Mauritania was hobbled from the start, having "no paved roads, a tiny number of schools," and an economy dominated by nomadic pastoralists, limiting important state functions like tax collection (Boukhars 2012, 4). The first cabinet meeting among Mauritanian politicians was held under a tent because there was functionally nothing built in the new capital of Nouakchott (N'Diaye 2017). Moreover, severe ethno-racial divides plagued Mauritania—three groups make up the country of 4.5 million: 30% black Mauritanians (made up of four different ethnic groups), 30% Arab-Berber Maurs (a nomadic people consisting of countless competing tribes), and 40% "Haratines, the descendants of slaves" (N'Diaye 2020, 3). The seemingly insurmountable challenge of forging "a new nation

out of an ethnically and culturally diverse population lumped together by colonial enterprise" fell

to Moktar Ould Daddah, a French-educated barrister and founding father of the post-colonial

Mauritanian state (N'Diaye 2017, 3).

In hindsight, it may seem that Mauritania was doomed to fail, but the country was

surprisingly stable for nearly the first two decades of its existence. Miraculously, President

Daddah was able to form a cogent Mauritanian national identity through "a consummate policy

of ethnic and regional balancing," a "promising economic development program," and

international policies that established Mauritania as a bridge between North and Sub-Saharan

Africa (N'Diaye 2017, 6). Tragically, Daddah pursued policies that would undermine this

stability and culminate in Mauritania's first coup.

1978 Mauritanian Coup

Despite the powerful cleavages tearing the country's fabric, Mauritania did not experience

any coups from 1960-1978. However, Daddah "made the fatal blunder" of supporting Spanish

Morocco's incursions into Western Sahara, entangling Mauritania in a costly war against the

Polisario liberation movement (N'Diaye 2017, 6). Tired of fighting a losing war, "the army took

power in a bloodless coup on July 10, 1978, and withdrew (quite laboriously) from the disastrous

territorial conflict (N'Diaye 2017, 6). Though the coup-plotters claimed to save "the nation from

ruin and dismemberment" (Koven 1978), the 1978 coup opened the floodgates for intense ethnic

rivalry and the perpetuation of coup attempts. Indeed, "dissension and personal ambitions within

the military junta led to the series of coups and countercoups that molded Mauritania into what it

is today," a country where the "preferred mode of access to power was to carry out a military

coup, and whose only means of remaining in power was to somehow foil coup attempts"

(N'Diaye 2017, 6). Had Daddah refrained from entering the war for Western Sahara, had the 1978 coup been avoided, perhaps Mauritania would closer resemble neighboring Senegal today.

After the 1978 coup, the fragile, emerging Mauritanian national identity fractured, and tribalism dominated politics. Before the coup, the Mauritanian army was a "cohesive institution largely spared the 'racial,' cultural/ethnic, regional, and ideological cleavages" inherent to the country's demographic makeup (N'Diaye 2017, 30). However, after the precedent of coup-making was established, incumbents began forming patronage networks to hedge against coup-plotters, which "de-professionalized" the military and inaugurated an era of "nepotism, clientelism, and endemic corruption" (N'Diaye 2017, 30). In Mauritania, patronage networks took a strictly tribalist character. All of Mauritania's coup-plotting colonels were Arab-Berbers who were "born 'under the tent' in a family with a nomadic lifestyle…in which the ultimate loyalty is to the family and tribe – not the nation" (N'Diaye 2017, 34). To this end, incumbents fearing coups would have only trusted and privileged members of their own clan. Accordingly, out-group clans would vie for power and conspire against the leader, only to continue the same cycle if they assumed leadership. Consistent with other countries, the variables of popular support and incumbent defense played important roles in driving coup making; in the following sections, I will analyze how they affected the 1978 coup.

Popular Support

President Daddah's participation in the war against the Western Saharan Polisario fomented political instability and exacerbated economic difficulties, creating the pretense for military intervention. Before the war, the Mauritanian economy already suffered from a yearslong Sahelian drought that left "millions of farmers destitute" (World Bank Group 1973). The drought killed an estimated 9 million Mauritanian cattle in a single year, decimated

vegetation, and forced the Mauritanian government to cut food rations (Walker 1974). In 1974, a

Mauritanian doctor declared, "we are living in catastrophe" (Walker 1974). Even though the

country was barely surviving the drought—which had already contributed to the fall of the

Nigerien and Ethiopian governments (Walker 1974)—President Daddah decided to invade

Western Sahara just a year later (Chograni 2021). The Western Saharan Polisario concentrated

their attacks on Mauritania, attacking the capital and killing "2,000 Mauritanian troops" by the

time Daddah's successors signed a ceasefire (Arnold 2025). With the support of Algeria, the

Polisario was repeatedly trying to "disrupt the Mauritanian economy" (U.S. Department of State

1977), exacerbating an already precarious socio-political environment. The national frustration

over the war strengthened coup plotter capacity by uniting the military against Daddah and

providing them a popular justification for their usurpation; it was a powerful pretense indeed,

with economic frailty and tensions with Western Sahara propelling Colonel Mohamed Ould

Louly to launch the country's next successful coup just a year later (Hadji 2023).

Incumbent Defense

Though President Daddah did try to consolidate his power and even anticipated the coup

attempt before the fact, he acquiesced without resistance to avoid conflict when the time came.

Once Daddah entered office in 1960, he ended the multiparty competition of the 1950s by

"relentlessly co-opting or marginalizing opposing personalities and viewpoints," officially

decreeing a single-party system in 1961 (Pazzanita 1996, 576). This single party, called the *Parti*

du peuple mauritanien (PPM), was further "streamlined" and made "increasingly subservient" to

Daddah to eliminate political dissidence (Pazzanita 1996, 576). This system strengthened and

protected Daddah's hold over the country, working relatively well until he decided to "occupy

and annex a portion of the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara was made with almost no

input from either the public or his governmental colleagues" (Pazzanita 1996, 577). Had the political environment been more competitive and free, Daddah may have avoided this costly blunder. In any case, Daddah had enough power and information to discover the coup plot against him long before it occurred, receiving notice from Mauritanian intelligence services about burgeoning military conspiracies "since the early 1970s" (Ould Daddah 2003, 17). The Moroccan and Congolese governments also alerted him of the 1978 plot as early as November 1977 (Ould Daddah 2003, 17). Incredibly, Daddah did not alert loyalists of the many warnings he had received and took no action to thwart the plot (Ould Daddah 2003, 18). He explained his thought process in his memoir—calculating that resistance would risk "bloodshed…between loyalists and coup plotters," in turn jeopardizing the war effort, Daddah decided to "face the predictable consequences of losing power" instead of risking Mauritania's survival (Ould Daddah 2003, 18), a country that he had helped build from the ground up.

Daddah's forward-thinking attitude ensured that the 1978 coup proceeded bloodlessly; however, his acquiescence did not halt Mauritania's descent into a politics characterized by coup-making. In addition to establishing a precedent of quasi-dictatorial rule focused on concentrating power, Daddah tried to adopt the Guinean model of integrating the military "into the single-party structures," committing the "original sin" of "politicizing the army" (N'Diaye 2020, 4). Expectedly, a politicized military intervened in politics. The 1978 coup legitimized military intervention and strengthened the military, with the army ballooning from 3,000 men in 1975 to 10,000 after 1978 (N'Diaye 2017, 33). Furthermore, not all leaders will possess the statesmen-like mindset that empowered Daddah to release the reigns of power peacefully. With an emboldened military apparatus and coup-fearing incumbents, Mauritania would experience

recurring coups, falling into the same trap as many of its peers. In the following section, I will analyze Mauritania's 1984 coup.

1984 Mauritanian Coup

On December 12, 1984, Colonel Maaouyi Ould Taya ousted President Haidallah in a bloodless coup while the latter was in Burundi for an international summit (Jeune Afrique 2007). There were many grievances against Haidallah in the lead-up to the coup, including poor economic conditions, a long-standing drought, and international tensions with Morocco after Haidallah recognized the Western Sahara, despite protests from other parts of the military (Jeune Afrique 2007). There was also a personal element to the coup, with Haidallah having demoted Taya a few years ago for opposing "rapprochement with the Algiers" (Jeune Afrique 2007). This was arguably the most transformative coup in Mauritanian politics, as Taya would stay in power for 21 years and pursue incumbent coup-proofing measures that would radically fragment the country along ethno-racial lines (N'Diaye 2017).

Popular Support

Similar to most coups in the regions, there was mounting anger against the regime in the lead-up to the 1984 coup. From the start of Haidallah's reign, black Mauritanians in the South mistrusted him for his Arab and Western Saharan roots, and pro-Morrocan groups were dismayed by his "peace treaty with the Polisario" of Western Sahara (Handloff 1988). To his credit, Haidallah did try to foster popular support, abolishing slavery to improve his perception among the black population and commencing plans to democratize and allow for multiparty competition (Handloff 1988). However, his collaboration with the Polisario and removal of political opposition resulted in the formation of the *Alliance pour une Mauritanie Démocratique* (AMD), comprised of his political rivals and funded by foreign adversaries like Morocco,

culminating in a failed coup in 1981 (Handloff 1988). Though Haidallah was able to thwart this attempt and establish friendly relations with countries like Libya and Algeria, he was soon surrounded by opposition. Morrocan troops advanced on Mauritania after Haidallah recognized the Western Saharan government, public anger erupted over corruption in Haidallah's government, and a "severe drought compounded the regime's difficulties" (Handloff 1988). A perfect storm of heightened dissatisfaction with the regime—both domestically and internationally—allowed Taya to quietly take power through a palace coup.

To be sure, Taya was not a populist voice of the people who mounted a coup in response to popular protests. By all accounts, he seized power out of self-interest and personal frustration against Haidallah. Nevertheless, Taya did attempt to respond to popular demands, especially early in his political career. In 1986, Taya's government held "elections for municipal councils" to democratize (an enterprise which Haidallah had all but abandoned after the 1981 coup attempt); however, there was "no provision for the formation of independent political parties," and the government brutally suppressed black African political activity (Pazzanita 1996), undermining the validity of this half-hearted attempt. Coup plotters turned incumbents often implement popular concessions or reforms early into their administration, especially in response to the grievances that plagued the preceding regime. Unfortunately, these ventures almost always played second fiddle to concerns of consolidating power and preventing another coup.

Incumbent Defense

Having come into power by coup himself, Haidallah almost immediately began purging sources of opposition in the government to coup-proof his administration (N'Diaye 2017). These efforts were likely motivated by the repeated occurrence of coups in Mauritania. In addition to the initial 1978 coup—which Haidallah helped execute—Mauritania experienced a palace coup

on April 6, 1979, placing Colonel Ahmed Ould Bouceif as the head of the ruling military junta (N'Diaye 2017, 32). Just over a month later, Bouceif died in a plane crash, after which Haidallah took the opportunity to quickly oust Colonel Mohamed Ould Louly in yet another palace coup (Maghreb Studies Association 2025, N'Diaye 2017, 32). Understandably paranoid about being usurped, Haidallah moved to restructure the government by removing "both pro-Moroccan and staunchly pro-Polisario factions" and eliminating other political competitors like "Vice President Ahmed Salem Ould Sidi" (Handloff 1988). Haidallah remained vigilant and adjusted the government to maintain his authority, catching and executing coup-plotters in 1981 and abandoning constitutionality to centralize control a month after the attempt (Handloff 1988).

While Haidallah's coup-proofing measures were grounded in reason and successfully thwarted a coup attempt, these defensive measures laid the groundwork for his eventual downfall. As mentioned before, leaders like Ahmed Sidi and pro-Moroccan junta members—whom Haidallah had purged—formed the foreign-funded opposition group *Alliance pour une Mauritanie Démocratique,* and eventually led the failed 1981 plot against Haidallah (Handloff 1988). Instead of representing "a collective body," Haidallah "attempted to amass considerable personal power and alienated many in the top echelons of government," suffering two more coup plots in 1982 and 1983 (Handloff 1988). When he demoted Colonel Taya following political disagreements, Haidallah further frustrated his powerful colleagues, resulting in the successful 1984 coup (Handloff 1988). Although Haidallah's coup-proofing efforts helped him survive three coup attempts, they also caused every one of these attempts. Ruling while constantly fearing coup attempts, Haidallah focused on coup-proofing regime at the expense of building trust and unity among his colleagues, unwittingly sowing the seeds of his own political demise.

Coups in West Africa During the 21st Century

Though West Africa seemed trapped in a cycle of endless coups, successful coup-making markedly decreased during the 1990s and the 2000s. Scholars have proposed many theories explaining the decrease, including political reform through civilian revolution (Clark, 2007), reduced foreign support for coup-plotting after the end of the Cold War (Nugent 2012, 262), and the imposition of strict ECOWAS sanctions against coupists (Obi 2009). However, the optimism was swiftly dashed by a stunning resurgence in successful coups during the 21st century, reigniting the conversation on this decades-long issue.

Upon closer examination, it is clear that most West African countries did not exit the path and fix the structural issues driving coups—incumbents had merely honed the craft of coup-proofing. Through a quantitative analysis of coup-attempts in Sub-Saharan Africa, Patrick McGowan found that though the rate of *successful* coups fell from 50.5%; between 1958 to 1979 to 34.7% between 1980 and 2001, the frequency of coup *attempts* remained virtually unchanged (McGowan, 2003). Blaisé Campoaré held power for 27 years in Burkina Faso; during this time, he survived at least three coups (Frère and Englebert 2015; Chouli 2015). Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya ruled for 20 years in Mauritania, also thwarting three known coup attempts (Pettigrew 2020; N'Diaye 2017). Benin's Mathieu Kérékou survived numerous coup attempts during his 29 years in office, witnessing six plots in 1988 alone (Wienkoop and Bertrand 2018). Successful coups were replete in all of these countries before the aforementioned leaders assumed their posts, indicating that these incumbents were highly effective in thwarting coups. Indeed, each one of these leaders implemented effective coup-proofing measures: Campoaré created and strengthened a powerful regiment in the military called the RSP dedicated solely to protecting him (Harsch 2017); Taya did the same, forming the Battalion for Presidential Security

(BASEP), which was "better equipped and better trained than the rest of the military," routinely strengthened after coup attempts (N'Diaye 2025); finally, Kérékou "heightened divisions within the security forces to dissolve any alliance between rival factions" (Morency-Laflamme 2020).

These coup-proofing efforts were not only effective in preserving power, but also in fomenting the very political instability and mistrust that gives rise to coup attempts. To illustrate the persistence of the harmful structural influences introduced by coup making—even under long-lasting incumbents—I will revisit the case example of Burkina Faso, which has experienced a popular uprising and three successful coups in the last decade. Specifically, I will analyze the 2014 Burkinabé uprising—which in itself resulted in a failed coup attempt and a successful counter-coup in 2015 (Harsch 2017)—and the January 2022 coup.

The 2014 Burkinabé Uprising

Even after holding power for 27 years, Blaisé Campoaré refused to loosen his grip on Burkina Faso, attempting to "amend the constitution so that he could run for another term," sparking national outrage that finally removed him from office on October 31, 2014 (Brett 2021, 273). The Burkinabé people drew courage from the memory of Thomas Sankara in their struggle (Al Jazeera, 2014). They delivered long overdue justice in 2014—though he fled to Côte d'Ivoire, Campoaré was "sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment for his participation" in Sankara's assassination (Jeune Afrique, 2025). The uprising came at a tragic cost, claiming nineteen lives and injuring hundreds more (Wienkoop & Bertrand 2018). The variables of popular support and incumbent defense help frame the event in Burkina Faso's political history.

Popular Support

Though Blaisé Campoaré's removal was driven entirely by popular support for democracy and anger against the incumbent, the firmly rooted military infrastructure attempted

to halt a democratic transition. In response to Campoaré's attempts to violate the constitution, "a million people marched through the streets of Ouagadougou and set the national assembly on fire," preventing the assembly from removing presidential term limits and forcing Campoaré to resign (Wienkoop & Bertrand 2018). The influential trade unions that played a role in all of Burkina Faso's preceding coups also contributed to the uprising, with "thirty three unions and union federations" uniting and declaring a general strike (Harsch 2021, 201). These conditions prompted scholars to label Campoaré's removal a popular uprising rather than a coup (Chouli 2015, 325). The 2014 uprising was not an isolated event, but the culmination of numerous large-scale protest events throughout Campoaré's reign, including a 2011 uprising after the death "of the school pupil Justin Zongo," which prompted brutal repression from the regime (Chouli 2015, 326).

The successful 2014 uprising could have been a critical juncture, delivering national catharsis and diverging from the path the country had fallen prey to since its first coup in 1966. Indeed, the Burkinabé people demanded a "civilian-led" democratic transition, tiring of repeated military intervention (Wienkoop, 2018). Unfortunately, Campoaré's military compatriots attempted a coup in 2015 to thwart this transition, prompting demonstrators to demand "their peers in uniform" to take action, culminating in a successful counter-coup led by young officers on September 23, 2015 (Wienkoop, 2018). Since the sources of political power and the aspirations for political change were vested in the military, the Burkinabé people once again relied on the armed forces to oust undemocratic coup-plotters—even though the challengers were also men in uniform. Nevertheless, all hope was not lost, as the victors of the 2015 counter-coup pursued democracy in earnest.

Following the chaos of 2014-2015, Burkina Faso appeared to have finally transitioned to democracy—at least temporarily. Just two months after the 2015 coup attempt, the government held democratic elections. The victor was Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, the first Burkinabé leader who did not have his "origins in the armed forces" since the country's first coup almost fifty years prior (Harsch 2021, 4). Tragically, this would not be a lasting democratic transition. Celebrations over the successful elections and the ejection of Campoaré were muted by a swift rise in jihadist violence from groups linked to Al Qaeda and ISIL, shaking the country to its core (Wilkins 2020). Serge Bambara (aka Smockey), a famous rapper and leader of the 2014 uprising claimed in 2020 that Kaboré's government had not met the "expectations of the people…We really had the right to expect better" (Wilson 2020). Less than two years after this statement, Burkina Faso would experience another coup, revealing the deep-seated influence of past coup-making on the country's politics. Before exploring the 2022 coup, I will analyze how Campoaré's coup-proofing strategies contributed to his downfall.

Incumbent Defense

Blaisé Campoaré's powerful coup-proofing efforts helped keep him in power for nearly thirty years; however, they magnified anger against his regime until his government burst like a faulty pressure cooker. Learning from Sankara—who relied on very little for personal security—Campoaré did everything to ensure he would not suffer the same fate as his former friend. From day zero of his rule, Campoaré left nothing to chance, sending coup-plotters to assassinate Sankara loyalists at a base 10 kilometers from the capital (Harsch 2021, 107). Soon after, he brutally dismantled a "400-man airport security battalion" resisting the coup, sparing no leadership to form against his government despite the outrage from all sides (Harsch 2021, 107). He continued to amass power throughout his tenure, fashioning a "dominant party-state that

marginalized effective opposition," cultivating a corrupt patronage system, filling political positions with family members, and establishing a counterbalancing unit called the *Régiment de la Sécurité Presidentielle* (RSP) (Harsch 2021, 129).

Consistent with other cases, Campoaré's coup-proofing efforts inspired many coup attempts. Campoaré engaged in blatant political corruption and favoritism, allocating "at least 105,000 plots of land…to politically connected individuals" (Harsch 2021, 126). The RSP was also handsomely rewarded at the expense of the rest of the military, receiving disproportionate "benefits and perks" and "virtual impunity for any acts they might commit" (Harsch 2021, 129). Indeed, the RSP's institutional power enabled them to launch a coup that almost halted Burkina Faso's 2015 elections even though Campoaré was out of power by that point (Al Jazeera 2015). These realities sparked significant discontent and instability throughout Campoaré's reign. When members of the RSP murdered journalist Norbert Zongo and received no punishment, for example, the country erupted in protest (Swarthmore College 2025). Campoaré's dictatorial behavior also gave rise to coup attempts, including one plotted by two of the most senior military figures, Commander Jean-Baptiste Lingani and Captain Henri Zongo, who were "summarily executed" when the conspiracy was discovered (Harsch 2021, 114). Protests in 2011, which spawned from widespread military mutinies, initially forced Campoaré from power, but he managed to cling on by the skin of his teeth (Harsch 2021, 172.) In hindsight, the 2014 uprising seems inevitable—Campoaré's attempt to stay in power in 2015 was not the sole reason for his ouster, but the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. By angering the population and alienating the military for the purpose of maintaining a vice grip on the country, Campoaré repeatedly risked his political survival and legacy. In 2014, he flew too close to the sun.

The 2022 Burkina Faso Coup

On January 24, 2022, the Burkinabé army removed President Kaboré through a coup (Al Jazeera 2022), ending the country's democratic experiment in its infancy. The coupists detained the President and announced their power grab on state television, with Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandoago Damiba at the helm (Al Jazeera 2022). He would not remain in power for long, however, as there would be another coup just eight months later, when Burkina Faso's current leader Ibrahim Traoré "declared himself head of state on September 30," 2022 (ACSC 2022). Though the country's political situation had significantly changed since Campoaré's ouster, I will demonstrate how similar patterns contributed to the resilience of coup politics.

Popular Support

Though there had been widespread protest for, and celebration over, the coming of democracy in 2015, there was widespread popular support for the January 2022 coup. The sharp turn in public opinion followed the country's deteriorating security. Though he was re-elected to a second term, Kaboré's administration was marred by terrorism; on June 5, 2021, for example, jihadist militants slaughtered over 100 civilians in the village of Solhan, marking one of the most violent episodes in the country's history (RFI 2021). In the five years between 2016 and 2021 alone, the violence displaced 6% of Burkina Faso's population (Human Rights Watch 2022). The crisis incited nationwide protests, with the Burkinabé calling for a stronger response from the government (Reuters 2021). Capitalizing on the national discontent, both of the coup leaders—Damiba in January of 2022 and Traoré in September of 2022—justified their takeovers with the argument that they would fix the crisis that their predecessor had mishandled (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2022). These arguments were effective, with celebratory demonstrations following both military interventions (Bertrand 2024). Traoré summed up the

nation's political climate, publicly stating that elections are "not a priority…security is the priority." Indeed, Afrobarometer's polling discovered that "66% of Burkinabè approved of the army taking power" (Bertrand 2024). The situation fills one with a sense of déjà-vu; frustrated with the incumbent and afraid for their lives, the public resorted to familiar tools for speedy political change and apparent safety. The fact that coups had long been a standard solution to unsatisfactory governance certainly contributed to the public's quick embrace of military intervention despite its severe implications for the country's newly won democracy. This is not to "blame" the Burkinabé people—in fact, it was the former president's fear of coup activity from the military that partly caused his poor response to the crisis.

Incumbent Defense

President Kaboré's mistrust of the military and subsequent coup-proofing strategies hampered his ability to respond to the crisis, forming the perfect pretense for military intervention against his government. Once in office, Kaboré understandably feared the persisting influence of Campoaré and members of the RSP in Burkina Faso's military (Bertrand 2024). This led him to pursue numerous policies meant to protect his power by keeping "the military as far removed as possible from public affairs," despite the mounting security crisis (Bertrand, 2024). For example, he deployed ex-RSP members to foreign missions, avoided holding a national security forum, and made himself defense minister; these policies hurt intelligence and spawned "internal conflict" (Bertrand 2024). Worse still, Kaboré began relying on non-state forces instead of the military, including ineffectual civilian militias that committed human rights violations and worsened intercommunal conflict (Bertrand 2024). A weakened military apparatus in the face of an unprecedented crisis is a recipe for disaster, breeding discontent among the public and the armed forces. In one incident, the "northern Inata military base" requested

immediate equipment and rations; however, the message was ignored for weeks, and the base suffered an attack that claimed the lives of 50 soldiers (Ochieng 2022). Kaboré's paranoia over military disloyalty was likely motivated by the country's history of coups. Fearing for his administration, Kaboré tried to weaken the military during a security crisis, ironically fostering the frustration and incentive needed for soldiers to mount a coup.

Conclusion

When Étienne Eyadéma shot and killed President Sylavanus Olympio in January of 1963, he didn't just slay one man—he toppled the first domino, setting a fire that would engulf his country's politics in flames, its tendrils still searing Togo's government to this day. Indeed, he did more than he could know, inaugurating a tradition that would ravage Africa like an epidemic, turning illegal seizures of government into de-facto elections. In this paper, I have argued that once a country experiences a coup, its politics fundamentally change. This argument of structural constraints is not exclusive to West Africa—coup occurrence will destabilize politics in any country, making the argument generalizable. In a political landscape where coups are not only possible but very likely, would-be usurpers are emboldened, and sitting incumbents are petrified. Such a reality introduces structural constraints that influence the behaviors of potential coup plotters and incumbents. When the right opportunities and incentives present themselves, ambitious soldiers will seize power. After becoming the incumbent, they are incentivized to coup-proof their regime at the expense of political stability and harmony, fomenting the very discontent that precipitates the next coup. So long as these structural constraints exist, salvation cannot be found in another military intervention—despite Burkinabé president Ibrahim Traoré's immense popularity, for example, his government suffered another coup attempt in late April of

this year (Aikins 2025). Let us, then, rewind the clock to January 13, 1963 in Togo, or January 3, 1966 in Burkina Faso, or July 10, 1978 in Mauritania. On these days, if a single shot had not been fired or one individual had not been arrested, the West African geopolitical landscape would look unrecognizably different today. That is the pivotal point to understand—one decision can irrevocably change the course of history for the better or the worse. Unfortunately, the damage dealt is not felt until the train has long since departed the station.

The implications of my argument extend far beyond the West African context—to illustrate that point, let's rewind the clock once again, this time to Newburgh, New York, 1783. In March of that year, anger against Congress was reaching a breaking point in the Continental Army, as soldiers had not been paid in months (Kohn 1975, 19). Capitalizing on this discontent, a radical wing of the army led by Horatio Gates "began planning a full-fledged coup d'état," planning to replace "Congress and ruling themselves" (Kohn 1975, 26). Upon discovering the plot, George Washington decided to convene the soldiers, telling Alexander Hamilton that he was "obliged…to rescue them from plunging themselves into a gulf of civil horror from which there might be no receding" (Washington, 1783). Rather than utilizing the crude tools of coup-proofing, George Washington brandished his extraordinary gift of statesmanship to disarm the Newburgh Conspiracy from ever manifesting. In the address that nipped this plot in the bud, Washington wisely stated that a coup would "overturn the liberties of our Country, and…open the flood Gates of Civil discord" (Washington, 1783). Indeed, it is our great fortune that the average American could not recount this story if so prompted. Had the Newburgh Conspiracy come to fruition, noxious influences would have been introduced to the country, which would have halted the emergence of democracy. There may not have been any United States of America.

Today, the United States faces a similar impasse, with more and more people tempted by the seduction of political extremism every day. On January 6, 2021, the United States experienced another failed coup attempt when over 2,000 angered citizens stormed the Capitol building to prevent the peaceful passage of presidential power (Gessen 2025). Today, the chief conspirator of that coup has become President, hinting that he will run for a third term (Smith 2025) despite the Constitution and purging top admirals and generals along political lines (Reuters 2025)—a textbook example of coup-proofing. Suffice to say, the United States is heading down a dangerous path. If a successful coup occurs, the country's politics will fundamentally change, and there will be no turning back. Given the incredible, multigenerational consequences of coup occurrence, policymakers and publics must do everything possible to keep the first domino standing. The country teeters on the precipice of history—we must find our balance lest we plunge down a dangerous path with no end in sight.

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