

West Africa.

Coups against democracy or anti-colonial acts?

Report from the Africa Club from October 2, 2023

Maëlle Nausner, Franz Schmidjell

In the well-attended Africa Club, participants discussed the causes and consequences of the coups in West Africa. Franz Schmidjell began by referring to the different narratives in reporting and social media. For some it was a break with democracy and the constitution that was unacceptable. For others, the coups represent an anti-colonial act and the beginning of sovereignty.

The moderator, Maria Reininger, referred to a total of seven coups in West Africa, each of which had its own logic. The discussion should focus on the three Sahel states of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. She asked the Franco-Cameroonian journalist, Marie-Roger Biola, to provide an overview of the background and causes of the coups in these countries.

Marie-Roger Biola noted general government failures and difficult security situations in the countries. The elites did not place enough focus on the economic plight of the people in their actions. Unemployment is high. The youth are desperate and the situation is worse than ten years ago. They are facade democracies. The international community would have ignored these deficits. In northern Mali there is violence caused by jihadists, and rebels have demanded their own state. France promised to sort out the situation, but everything has gotten worse. The situation is similar in Burkina Faso. A civilian president failed to calm the situation. Niger has rich uranium deposits. But the population cannot share in the wealth. The coup was also about control over oil reserves. France is seen by many as a scapegoat, but that is too easy. France is in the foreground, but is not the main reason for the coup wave. The model of democracy is being questioned; it has brought no benefits to the people. People lack perspectives and the coups offer no alternative. Biola pointed out that the military in Mali is corrupt. In Burkina Faso there are power struggles within the security forces.

Film director Igor Hautzenberger was there in July, to complete his Niger documentary at the “*La fête du Bianou*” festival in Agadez. In the past, Agadez remained a peaceful city despite the various crises, which can be attributed to the measures taken by the city administration and the Sultan to combat radicalization and violence. But during the Bianou Festival the mood became more and more aggressive, and Russian flags suddenly appeared, which obviously came from outside. Young people are frustrated and don’t see any progress, said Hautzenberger. The promises made by European politicians after 2015 haven’t been fulfilled, and the money did not reach the youth. The anger was primarily directed against France.

Irene Horejs, former EU ambassador to Mali and Niger, reported on the reactions of the international community. The EU reacted very strongly to the coup in Mali and Niger and stopped budget support, but not project aid. The USA was more cautious. This was due to security interests in the Sahel and the American drone base in Niger. France has suspended all support for Niger and Mali, but not for Chad, Burkina Faso and Gabon. The consequences for the countries are serious, says Horejs. The security situation has deteriorated and the humanitarian crisis has worsened. The salaries of civil servants were only partially paid out. The ECOWAS sanctions led to shortages and increases in prices for basic foods.

The musician and artist Patrick Bongola aka “Topoke” called for sovereignty of Africa and advocated for a new pan-Africanism. Young people are networked, like everywhere else in the world. She has had enough of the paternalism that European flags are good and Russian flags are bad. She criticized the European double standards. The West bombed Libya and overthrew the government. Before that, the country was economically well developed and stable, but now there is chaos, which is also affecting the Sahel region.

Belachew Gebrewold classified the various coups as symptoms of deeper problems, for example weak statehood, but also a mentality that persists in the role of victim. He sees four problem areas:

-The patriarchal system: it is exclusively men who have the feeling that they have been chosen by God to remain in power. Corruption and clientelism are also related to this.

-The ethnicization of African politics: “We have failed to construct a common African identity and a common national interest and to see other ethnic groups as potential partners rather than enemies.”

- Gebrewold continued: “We still glorify the West, but we deny it because it is shameful. Africa’s elites are orienting themselves towards Europe and sending their money there; We are migrating to Europe. We want to live, consume and look like Europeans. Our behavior is paradoxical. Postcolonial Africans hate and love the West at the same time because it always points to our inadequacy. We have liberated ourselves for the West historically, but not mentally.”

-The West is the post-colonial scapegoat: “We have not managed to prove that we can govern ourselves better. The West is to blame for everything. We Africans do not have the inner determination to prove that the white supremacists were wrong when they called us inferior people.”

Positions and opinions from the discussion

General sanctions primarily affect the population and have rarely contributed to solving problems in the past. Targeted sanctions against specific people or companies and financial networks make more sense.

The military threat from ECOWAS was influenced, among other things, by Nigeria’s domestic politics. Intervention is risky due to the ethnic composition of the Nigerian army (similar to neighboring countries) and will lead to destabilization of the entire region. The starting point for the ECOWAS intervention in Gambia in 2017 was different. ECOWAS is also seen by some participants as loyal to France.

How much does the sovereignty of the state weigh? Do we want to continue to rely on the international community or rather follow the path of “African solutions for African problems?” In Burkina Faso, security and the social situation have deteriorated enormously in recent years. Someone with power had to act. That’s why the military intervened. An African journalist wrote an article entitled “Fraxit means Fraxit” about France’s withdrawal or expulsion.

Breach of the constitution and end of democracy: Europe sees some “fake democracies” as “good students” because the elites are pursuing a European agenda in the country. The frustration among the population, especially the youth, is not taken seriously. Other forms of democracy are needed; elections hardly work. According to the constitution, military coups are to be viewed as illegitimate; they are the worst form of government there is.

**AFRIKA
CLUB**



VIDC
Vienna Institute for
International Dialogue
and Cooperation

What did the military bring? According to the Guardian, a quarter of schools in Mali have been closed and the security situation has worsened. Niger has 33,000 soldiers, but three times that number would be needed for a huge country. Without an external military presence, the security situation will deteriorate. Wagner as an alternative is controversial, and not just because of the human rights violations. In Mali, the mercenary group is demanding 100 million euros. The ECOWAS blockade on arms deliveries was cited as another reason for the difficult security situation.

Military solutions? The multiple crises in the Sahel cannot be solved militarily alone. It is also due to government failure and an exclusive economic policy that no prospects are offered for young people. It must also be asked where the terrorists get their money, weapons and vehicles from. Their banking connections and arms purchases should be blocked.

The EU needs dialogue and cooperation with countries, especially on security and migration. It therefore makes sense to choose a pragmatic approach instead of threatening and drawing red lines, A positive approach could be direct cooperation with cities and municipalities with good governance- Agadez was given as an example.

The economic decline and the lack of prospects for young people- especially in the border regions- have several causes. These include the pension economies of governments, the asymmetrical economic and trade relations with Europe and Franca-Afrique with the neo-colonial institutions such as the Franc-CFA. But general slogans are not enough, and critical analysis is needed. What are the consequences of linking the France-CFA to the strong euro? What does it mean if France co-determines the monetary and interest rate policy for the CFA states? Mali and Burkina Fado want to increase regional value chains for raw materials.

How they want to do this, would be a topic for the next Africa Club.