

Closing the Book on Africa's First Generation Coups

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Abstract

The Zimbabwean Armed Forces' November 2017 removal of Robert Mugabe was the first successful military coup in Africa in over three years. Increasingly rare in contemporary politics, Mugabe's removal at the barrel of the gun was a common fate for the original generation of political leadership in the region. We contextualize Mugabe's removal by reviewing the fates of Sub-Saharan Africa's original post-colonial leadership, of which a majority was directly removed in military coups. The fall of Mugabe can be seen as the final chapter on coups against the original generation of leadership, but is unique in regard to the fate of the ousted leader. Of all prior first generation leaders removed via a coup, each was imprisoned, exiled, or killed in association with the coup.

Introduction

Lumumba. Olympio. Nkrumah. Cabral. Mugabe. Following a week of attempting to coerce a resignation from their president, on 21 November 2017 the Zimbabwean Armed Forces (ZAF) finally secured it, placing him as one of scores of heads of state who have been removed via coups in post-colonial Africa.¹ Though Mugabe's reign had been plagued by a variety of crises, he had previously managed to maintain the loyalty of the armed forces and the ruling ZANU-PF. His efforts to purge high ranking ZANU-PF members, including notable veterans of the Bush War, eventually went too far with the dismissal of Vice

President Emmerson Mnangagwa. In a highly organized maneuver, armed forces under the leadership of Constantino Chiwenga effectively removed Mugabe on 14 November.

The coup was remarkable in a number of respects. Coups rarely unseat leaders as long tenured as Mugabe. Further, though once described by Decalo as “the most visible and recurrent characteristic of the African political experience,”² coups have become an increasing rarity.³ No African state had witnessed a leader removed via a coup in over three years at the time of Mugabe’s removal.⁴ No regime had even experienced a failed coup attempt since Gilbert Diendéré’s ill-fated effort to seize power in Burkina Faso in September 2014.⁵ Mugabe’s ouster at the hands of the soldiers who had previously supported him is perhaps less surprising, however, when viewed in a broader historical context. Though coups have been more of a rarity in the continent’s contemporary politics, such a fate was quite common for Africa’s original generation of post-colonial leaders. Considering the fates of Africa’s initial independent leadership, or what we refer to here as the Old Guard (OG), illustrates the unfortunate frequency of military coups, including against some of the continent’s most prominent leaders. The ouster of Mugabe can then potentially be viewed as the final chapter of an earlier period of African political history, one that saw the original generation of leadership more likely to be removed via a coup than all other methods combined.

In the following discussion, we explore the fate of the original leadership in Africa south of the Sahara, while focusing on countries which gained independence from a European colonizer after World War II. Given the desire to focus on the first generation of independent political leadership, the following assessment necessarily omits cases that were not formally colonized (Ethiopia, Liberia), cases which earned independence prior

to this time period (South Africa), or received independence from another African state (Eritrea, South Sudan, Cape Verde). This results in a sample of 39 countries, of which 20 saw the OG driven from power by a military coup.⁶

However, the case also illustrates important differences. Of each of the 20 previous OGs who were removed from power via a military coup, all were either killed, imprisoned, or exiled in the coup's aftermath. Mugabe's post-tenure fate, as of this writing, is considerably better. While unique among the OGs in this regard, Mugabe's post-tenure fate is indicative of the contemporary era, one that has seen leaders fare considerably better following their ousters. We close the paper with a brief discussion of the reasons for these shifts in leader fates, focusing primarily on the desire of coup leaders and post-coup governments to attempt to legitimize the act.

Conceptualizing Coups

The ZAF's removal of Mugabe included a number of notable characteristics, including efforts to convince both domestic and international audiences that the maneuver was not a coup. Beyond semantics, the distinction could have real world consequences by triggering a variety of bilateral or international frameworks that are designed to respond to coups. These efforts drew attention from many observers who suggested the event was not actually a coup, or perhaps a highly unusual one, citing both the desire to secure Mugabe's resignation and the motives indicated in the original statement from the military. That statement, provided by Major General SB Moyo, claimed

“To both our people and the world beyond our borders, we wish to make it abundantly clear that this is not a military takeover of government. What the

Zimbabwe Defence Forces is doing is to pacify a degenerating political, social and economic situation in our country which if not addressed may result in violent conflict.”⁷

Such overtures, however, are far from unique. Even some of Africa’s more infamous coup leaders have offered similar statements. Joseph Mobutu, for example, noted his “neutralization” of Patrice Lumumba was “not a military coup d’état, but merely a peaceful revolution...No soldier will be in power.”⁸ Even five years later, after removing Joseph Kasavubu, international press did not take alarm in Mobutu’s actions. Reuters, for example, noted that “The thin, bespectacled young man does not look the role of the strong man.”⁹ Mobutu did, of course, hold on to power for over three decades. Idi Amin, meanwhile, noted he was “not a politician, but a professional soldier...mine will be purely a caretaker administration, pending an early return to civilian rule.”¹⁰ Within a week Amin backtracked on his promise, establishing himself as president and overseeing a calamitous eight-year reign.

Post-coup odes to lacking political objectives are also frequently accompanied by concerted efforts to legitimize their actions. This can involve a variety of efforts, including securing a resignation, having the parliament endorse the effort after the fact, or—much more common recently—holding an election. Mugabe’s resignation would be but the most recent example of such efforts, and Bruce Farcau’s *The Coup: Tactics in the Seizure of Power* specifically notes that putschists often go to great lengths to legitimize coups through securing resignations.¹¹ Burkina Faso’s Maurice Yaméogo took such signaling a step further, having been quoted as saying he was “rejoiced” at his removal, going on to

claim “I am happy that the Chief of Staff of the army, surrounded by this officers, has been able in perfect harmony with me, to act in such a way that the country can go forward.”¹²

Nor does popularity among the masses disqualify the event as a coup. Though thousands may have celebrated Mugabe’s ouster in the streets of Harare, popular support does not change the manner in which the incumbent was removed. Calls by protesters for military intervention are quite common, as are post-coup celebrations. For example, Christophe Soglo seized power from Hubert Maga following a general strike in which participants overtly waived signs calling for his removal.¹³ Just two years later, protesters again called for the military to remove Justin Ahomadegbe.¹⁴ Kenneth Kaunda, meanwhile, was put in the awkward situation where civilians celebrated thinking the long-time ruler had been toppled. Kaunda, of course, survived Mwamba Luchembe’s coup against him. These were all, of course, coups.

Scholars, pundits, and even soldiers can debate over the precise definition of a coup, and squabble over whether specific cases fit the definition. Many cases are quite ambiguous, and are often coded in different ways by different data projects. There are, however, commonalities. Coups are generally thought of as efforts to unseat the current chief executive, waged via illegal (though not necessarily violent) means, by conspirators who are some part of the formal state apparatus. Unsurprisingly, this is primarily seen with actions from the armed forces. For the purposes of this discussion, we reviewed multiple commonly used data projects and directly evaluated the political fate of each leader. For consistency with prior research, our discussion below—unless noted otherwise—relies on the classification offered in the Archigos Dataset of Political Leaders.¹⁵ This project codes the manner of entering and exiting office, including

considering whether the executive was specifically removed by the military. We do, however, describe a number of instances of disagreement with the data where necessary.

We present the mode of exit for each leader covered in this discussion in Table 1. The data indicate that 19 of the 38 OGs who had left office prior to Mugabe were removed by their militaries. The next most common manner of exit, natural death, only resulted in eight cases. Also revealing is that these 19 military coups exclude other cases that narrowly miss the formal definition of a coup, but in which the military played a deciding role. For example, the Republic of the Congo's Fulbert Youlou faced a crisis when confronted by a wide coalition of protesters during the *Trois Glorieuses* in 1963. His requests for support from both his own soldiers and a French garrison went unanswered, and he was instead requested by his army to resign.¹⁶ The military took an active role in the transition, which saw the constitution suspended, the national assembly dissolved, and the army's selection of Alphonse Massamba-Débat as Prime Minister. Similarly, the Malagasy May saw Philibert Tsiranana ousted under similar pressure from protesters in 1972. Though the armed forces were not directly responsible for Tsiranana's removal, executive power transferred directly to Madagascar's Defense Chief, Major General Gabriel Ramanantsoa.

[Table 1 about here]

Even leaders who managed to avoid being ousted by their militaries often survived substantial threats. Jomo Kenyatta and Julius Nyerere, for example, infamously faced large scale army mutinies in Kenya and Tanzania, respectively, in January 1964.¹⁷ Other leaders survived coup attempts, including Mozambique's Samora Machel (1975), Somalia's Aden Abdullah Osman Daar (1961), Angola's Agostinho Neto (1977),

Senegal's Léopold Senghor (1962), and Zambia's Kaunda (1991).¹⁸ Of the leaders considered in this study, only Botswana's Seretse Khama, Cameroon's Ahmadou Ahidjo, and Guinea's Sékou Touré avoided these events.

The Fates of Leaders

African OGs also saw a much more direct and sinister side of their armed forces. Often “done with the connivance – where not the collaboration – of the west,” many leaders did not survive these threats, either in the political or biological sense.¹⁹ The post-tenure fates of leaders is summarized in Table 2. Specifically, the table reports the leader's fate in the immediate aftermath of the coup. Notably, Patrice Lumumba was murdered months after his 1960 “neutralization” by Joseph Mobutu. Sylvanus Olympio was gunned down just a stone's throw from the American embassy during Togo's 1963 putsch. Soon after Nigeria's 1966 coup, Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewaz's body was found unceremoniously dumped on the roadside. Chad's N'Garta Tombalbayev was later executed by his military during the 1975 coup against him. Equatorial Guinea's Francisco Macías Nguema, meanwhile, was quickly tried and executed following his 1979 ouster.

[Table 2 about here]

Primarily benefiting from being abroad when the coup was undertaken, five of those ousted managed to immediately transition to life in exile, such as Gambia's Dawda Jawara, Burundi's Mwambutsa IV, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Lesotho's Leabua Jonathan, and Guinea-Bissau's Luís Cabral. Beyond these, Uganda's Milton Obote managed to return to power almost a decade after being exiled by Idi Amin, though he

would be permanently exiled after another coup against him in 1985. Most, leaders, however, were at least initially jailed. Mauritania's Moktar Ould Daddah was jailed for a year before being exiled to France. David Dacko was imprisoned for over three years following Jean Bedel Bokassa's New Years 1966 coup in the Central African Republic. Dacko managed to return to the presidency following the demise of the Bokassa regime, but was again ousted in another coup in 1981. Leon Mba's detention was at least short lived, thanks to a swift French intervention that restored him to the Gabonese presidency.

Other OGs, however, were less fortunate. Despite initially being involved in the post-coup regime, Benin's Hubert Maga was quickly accused of plotting against new president Christophe Soglo and promptly jailed. Maga's supporters took action to secure his release, engaging in high profile attacks that required a military campaign against them. Maga was subsequently allowed to go into exile. Niger's Hamani Diori, whose wife was killed during the coup against him, was imprisoned for six years, and held under house arrest for another seven before living out his final years in Morocco. Maurice Yaméogo's public displays of support for the coup against him did little good, as he was quickly jailed and sentenced to hard labor. His four years of imprisonment included multiple suicide attempts. Mali's Modibo Keita passed away while still a prisoner, nine years following his removal. Rwanda's Grégoire Kayibanda and his wife disappeared following the coup against him. It is believed they were held prisoner in a secret location and intentionally starved to death.

That Mugabe's fate would be sealed by his military is not unusual when compared alongside other OGs. He joins a veritable pantheon of post-colonial and pan-Africanist leaders who were removed at the barrel of a gun, particularly when we consider Mugabe's

role as a founding leader. And as the military continued the time-honored tradition of legitimization through ex post resignation and other forms of legal window dressing, the comparative safety of the ousted leader represents an important departure from this earlier era. Mugabe's improved post-coup fate is itself likely a product of efforts to seek external legitimacy for both the coup plotters and subsequent government, a dynamic that appears to be especially strong in the contemporary era, and something that the Zimbabwe case saw the plotters do quite well.

Whereas other "more obvious" military coups, such as the 2009 ouster of Marc Ravalomanana in Madagascar was followed by external condemnation, sanctions, and mediation attempts from relevant regional organizations including the Southern African Development Community, such international sanctioning did not follow the removal of Mugabe. Indeed, regional power South Africa, along with other key members of the SADC, did not voice any reservations regarding the military's seizure of power and at one point appeared to be negotiating Mugabe's resignation following his house arrest. The presence of some of the leaders of these SADC member-states at the inauguration of Mnangagwa seemed to indicate Mugabe's prior loss of external legitimacy, accompanied by the calculated efforts of the military to legitimize the coup, led to the tacit endorsement of the action. Further, though numerous actors pointed to various flaws in the electoral process, the AU, SADC, and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa all refrained from criticizing the election.²⁰

Aside from Mugabe's prior loss of legitimacy, actions taken by the coup plotters and Mnangagwa likely played a role in tempering international responses. This is true for both initial attempts to pitch Mugabe's resignation as willing, as well as later efforts to

improve the (though still flawed) electoral process. Mugabe's status after the coup is also a likely product of this process. Our review of both the Archigos dataset and an original assessment of post-coup leader fates indicates that important temporal dynamics are at play. Of Africa's OGs, 25% of those removed via a coup were killed during or immediately after the event. Looking more broadly at all African leaders ousted during the Cold War reveals that almost 20% of those removed via coups were killed. This is in stark contrast to the region's contemporary politics, which has seen no leaders killed during or after the 15 successful coups that have occurred under the AU.²¹

This shift in fates is not coincidental. Though coups do obviously still occur, a growing anti-coup norm has encouraged coup plotters to take various actions to gain legitimacy. While most obvious with the now almost ubiquitous calling of post-coup elections, contemporary international norms have likely served ousted leaders in one important—yet underappreciated—manner: selling legitimacy is better served when the deposed are treated well.

Figure 1: Political Fates of Original Generation Leaders, Africa South of the Sahara

Country	Leader	Exit	Manner
Sudan	Al-Azhari	1956	Electoral Loss
Dem. Rep of Congo	Patrice Lumumba	1960	Military Coup
Congo	Fulbert Youlou	1963	Popular Protest
Benin	Hubert Maga	1963	Military Coup
Togo	Sylvanus Olympio	1963	Military Coup
Sierra Leone	Milton Margai	1964	Natural Death
Gabon	Léon Mba	1964	Military Coup
Burkina Faso	Maurice Yaméogo	1966	Military Coup
Ghana	Kwame Nkrumah	1966	Military Coup
Nigeria	Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	1966	Military Coup
Central African Rep.	David Dacko	1966	Military Coup
Burundi	Mwambutsa IV	1966	Military Coup
Somalia	Osman Daar	1967	Electoral Loss
Mali	Modibo Keita	1968	Military Coup
Uganda	Milton Obote	1971	Military Coup
Madagascar	Philibert Tsiranana	1972	Popular Protest
Rwanda	Grégoire Kayibanda	1973	Military Coup
Niger	Hamani Diori	1974	Military Coup
Chad	Francois Tombalbaye	1975	Military Coup
Comoros	Ahmed Abdallah	1975	Rebels/Mercenary
Kenya	Jomo Kenyatta	1978	Natural Death
Mauritania	Ould Daddah	1978	Military Coup
Angola	Agostinho Neto	1979	Natural Death
Equatorial Guinea	Francisco Macías Nguema	1979	Military Coup
Senegal	Leopold Senghor	1980	Resigned
Botswana	Seretse Khama	1980	Natural Death
Guinea-Bissau	Luís Cabral	1980	Military Coup
Cameroon	Ahmadou Ahidjo	1982	Resigned-III Health
Swaziland	Subhuza II	1982	Natural Death
Guinea	Sékou Touré	1984	Natural Death
Tanzania	Julius Nyerere	1985	Resigned
Mozambique	Samora Machel	1986	Natural Death
Lesotho	Leabua Jonathan	1986	Military Coup
Zambia	Kenneth Kaunda	1991	Electoral Loss
Cote d'Ivoire	Houphouet-Boigny	1993	Natural Death
Malawi	Hastings Banda	1994	Electoral Loss
Gambia	Dawda Jawara	1994	Military Coup
Djibouti	Hassan Gouled Aptidon	1999	Resigned
Zimbabwe	Robert Mugabe	2017	Military Coup

Figure 2: Post-Tenure Fates of Original Generation Leaders, Africa South of the Sahara

Country	Leader	Year	Fate
Dem. Rep of Congo	Patrice Lumumba	1960	Death
Benin	Hubert Maga	1963	Imprisonment
Togo	Sylvanus Olympio	1963	Death
Gabon	Léon Mba	1964	Imprisonment
Burkina Faso	Maurice Yaméogo	1966	Imprisonment
Ghana	Kwame Nkrumah	1966	Exile
Nigeria	Abubakar Tafewa Balewa	1966	Death
Central African Republic	David Dacko	1966	Imprisonment
Burundi	Mwambutsa IV	1966	Exile
Mali	Modibo Keita	1968	Imprisonment
Uganda	Milton Obote	1971	Exile
Rwanda	Grégoire Kayibanda	1973	Imprisonment
Niger	Hamani Diori	1974	Imprisonment
Chad	Francois Tombalbaye	1975	Death
Mauritania	Moktar Ould Daddah	1978	Imprisonment, exile
Equatorial Guinea	Francisco Macías Nguema	1979	Death
Guinea-Bissau	Luís Cabral	1980	Exile
Lesotho	Leabua Jonathan	1986	Exile
Gambia	Dawda Jawara	1994	Exile
Zimbabwe	Robert Mugabe	2017	?

Notes

¹ We ultimately use multiple efforts to define and classify coup events. As a default, we define coups as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive.” Unless noted otherwise, we are referring to successful coups. Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, Global Instances of Coups, *Journal of Peace Research* 48(2) 2011, 249-259.

² Samuel Decalo *Coups and Army Rule in Africa*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.

³ On the decline coups, see Jonathan Powell, Trace Lasley, and Rebecca Schiel Combating Coups d'état in Africa, 1950-2014, *Studies in Comparative International Development* 51, 2016, 482-502.

⁴ Henk Goemans, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Giacomo Chiozza Introducing Archigos: A Dataset of Political Leaders, *Journal of Peace Research* 46(2) 2009, 269-283.

⁵ References to failed coup attempts are taken from Powell & Thyne, “Global Instances of Coups.”

⁶ This includes considering the removal of Mwambutsa IV of Burundi a military coup. The monarch fled during a 1965 coup effort from Hutu army officers, never to return. Crown Prince Ntare V acted as ruler in his absence prior to formally deposing his father in July 1966. He was himself ousted in a military coup just months later. The Archigos dataset considers the event to be a “removal by other government actors,” which would still qualify as a coup by most standards, though not of the military variety.

⁷ Zimbabwe Army Statement in Full, *The Guardian*, 14 November 2017.

⁸ K. Martial Frindethie *From Lumumba to Gbagbo: Africa in the Eddy of the Euro-American Quest for Exceptionalism*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company. 2016, p. 230.

⁹ Kasavubu Regime Ousted by Army Coup in Congo, *Reuters*, 25 November 1965.

¹⁰ Ogenga Otunnu *Crisis of Legitimacy and Political Violence in Uganda, 1890 to 1979*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹¹ Bruce Farcau *The Coup: Tactics in the Seizure of Power*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994.

¹² Army Chief of Staff Seizes Power, *New York Times*, 4 January 1966.

¹³ Dahomey's Army Chief Unseats Day-Old Regime, *New York Times*. 29 October 1963.

¹⁴ Dahomey Crowd Asks Army to Take Power in Turnover, *New York Times*. 29 November 1965.

¹⁵ Goemans et al., “Introducing Archigos.”

¹⁶ Chuka Onwumechili *African Democratization and Military Coups*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998. p. 45; Decalo, *Coups and Army Rule in Africa*.

¹⁷ Ali Mazrui and Donald Rothchild The Soldier and the State in East Africa: Some Theoretical Conclusion on the Army Mutinies of 1964, *Western Political Quarterly* 20(1), 1967, 82-96.

¹⁸ Powell and Thyne, “Global Instances of Coups.”

¹⁹ Ruth First *Power in Africa*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1971. p. 21.

²⁰ Regional observers declare Zimbabwe election free and fair, *The EastAfrican*, 1 August 2018.

²¹ Guinea-Bissau's Joao Vieira was killed by members of the armed forces in March 2009. Due to the military's disinterest in seizing power, and the constitutional manner of Vieira's succession, the event is considered an assassination rather than a military coup.