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NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

How the UK should respond to the growing number of military coups in Africa

TOP LINES

- Historically, military coups in Africa have been commonplace, but until recently there was a view that a period of democratic stability on the continent might lead to their decline. Last year, an African Union official expressed concern regarding ["the resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government"](#).
- On 30 August 2022, the military in Gabon launched a coup against removing President Ali Bongo Ondimba from power and annulling the results of elections which took place on 26 August 2023.
- This marks the second coup in West Africa in less than a month, as the military in Niger overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum and have [called](#) for 1,500 French troops based in the country to leave.
- These coups appear likely to increase instability in the West African region, which in recent years has seen a nine year French deployment of troops fighting Islamic insurgents in Mali bookended by two military coups (2021 and 2012) in the country and the collapse of the Central African Republic into civil war.
- Stepping into the void of the instability in the region has been Russia's Wagner Mercenary group which is [reported](#) to have deployments currently in Syria, Libya, Mozambique, Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan, with unconfirmed rumours that they have also been spotted in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- The UK has strategic, economic, development, geo-political and values based interests in the West African region which should present the growing instability and latest military coups as a cause for concern.
- The Government should clarify its messaging when it comes to our values-based opposition to military coups and to working with military governments.
- In the past, the UK has condemned military seizures of power only to then work closely with military governments (in the case of Egypt) sending mixed messages regarding UK foreign policy, including our support for democracy, free and fair elections, and human rights.

- The Government should support the immediate suspension of any member of the Commonwealth where a military coup takes place.
- More broadly, we should seek to reform Commonwealth membership with a trade, regulatory, and visa component that demonstrates the economic value of membership and in return work to increase expectations that Commonwealth members will adhere to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This should include more funded scholarships for students at UK universities.
- The Government should undertake polling and research to better understand the perception of UK foreign, development, trade, and defence policy in Africa, and work to ensure that investment and development aid are seen as partnerships with African host countries and not as a form of neo-colonialism.
- UK Ministers should assess the issues like corruption that lead to demands for the Wagner Group's services in African countries in terms of military training, security assistance, and communications capabilities, and see if there are opportunities for the UK working with like minded partners to address them.
- The Government should introduce further proactive measures to crackdown on the City of London being used by corrupt government ministers to hide wealth plundered from the state and work to return stolen wealth back to the countries of origin.
- Ministers should consider using the Lancaster House format as an opportunity to discuss France's changing role in the West African region and to invite African leaders to discuss future defence and security partnerships as equals.

BACKGROUND

On 30 August 2022, the military in Gabon launched a coup against removing President Ali Bongo Ondimba from power and annulling the results of elections which took place on 26 August 2023.

This marks the second coup in West Africa in less than a month, as the military in Niger overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum and have [called](#) for 1,500 French troops based in the country to leave.

The circumstances of the coup in Gabon

The military coup against President Ali Bongo in Gabon ends the 56 year dynastic rule of President Ali Bongo and his father, with the military claiming they were forced to intervene as a result of fraudulent election results

President Ali Bongo [previously](#) took over rule of Gabon in 2009 and ruled the country for 14 years, inheriting his position from his father. President Bongo's previous elections have been highly disputed and last year members of the Bongo family were prosecuted in France for stealing the country's oil wealth.

Voting in the elections in Gabon on 26 August 2023 were [conducted](#) under an internet blackout, night time curfews, the suspension of foreign broadcasts, and the blocking of international observers.

Analysts have argued that the circumstances of the coup in Gabon which mark the ending of the dictatorial rule of the Bongo family following claims of election rigging, are starkly different from the coup in Niger which has seen the [removal](#) of the first democratically elected president since the country's independence.

The increase of coups in Africa

Historically, military coups in Africa have been commonplace, but until recently there was a view that a period of democratic stability on the continent might lead to their decline. Last year, an African Union official expressed concern regarding ["the resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government"](#).

US researchers, Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, have noted that military coups in Africa from 1960 to 2000 have remained fairly consistent [at an average of around four a year](#). Analysing over 200 coups, they have calculated that [around half](#) are successful.

Overall Africa has experienced more military coups than any other continent. [Of the 18 military coups since 2017, only one of them \(Myanmar\) have been in Africa.](#)

These coups appear likely to increase instability in the West African region, which in recent years has seen a nine year French deployment of troops fighting Islamic insurgents in Mali bookended by two military coups (2021 and 2012) in the country and the collapse of the Central African Republic into civil war.

The role of the Wagner Group

Stepping into the void of the instability in the region has been Russia's Wagner Mercenary group which is [reported](#) to have deployments currently in Syria, Libya, Mozambique, Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan, with unconfirmed rumours that they have also been spotted in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the past, the Wagner Group has managed to further Russian influence by [providing](#) combat operations, private security and training support, and disinformation campaigns to African governments in exchange for the rights to critical mineral mines and oil and gas fields.

In the case of the Central African Republic it is estimated that there are around [1,890 "Russian instructors"](#) in the country supporting the Government in its civil war. While in Mali, its military government is reported to be paying Wagner [around \\$10.8m a month](#) for its services.

Since Wagner's march on Moscow and the assassination of its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin there remains open ended questions as to the future of the mercenary organisation, some analysts have noted that their role will partially be replaced by other private military companies. That being said, the Wagner Group will continue to remain active in the region.

It is unclear whether Wagner's services will be enlisted in either Gabon or Niger.

A French retreat?

As the former colonial power in the region, France has maintained close economic, security links, and influence throughout West Africa as part of what has been known as "Françafrique".

Historically, France has had [8,700 troops](#) stationed in bases across West Africa, supported the [West African Franc Zone](#) (which is used by 14 West African countries), and given [significant](#) overseas development aid to the region.

France's military footprint in West Africa and the requirement for countries using the West African Franc to peg their currency to the Euro and deposit 50% of their currency reserves with the Banque de France has been the [source](#) of sustained controversy within the region.

After a ten year military deployment in Mali and the Sahel region to fight Islamic insurgents ended in August 2022, French President Macron has [reduced](#) French troops in the region to around 3,000.

In the face of rising criticism of France's role in the region, President Macron has also [committed](#) to reorganise military bases and turn them into co-run academies with African partners.

Following military coups in Burkina Faso (2022) and Mali (2020), French troops and diplomats were [forced to leave](#). The military officers who took power in the coup in Niger last month are now calling on France to do the same.

French diplomats have argued that pulling out of the region would only benefit authoritarian states including Russia and China.

Why should the UK care about the growing number of military coups in Africa?

The UK has strategic, economic, development, geo-political and values based interests in the West African region which should present the growing instability and latest military coups as a cause for concern.

Freedom House, which provides an annual index on the state of democracy, has [found](#) that a number of West African countries have experienced the largest decline of freedoms in the last decade, including the Central African Republic that fell 28 points and Gabon that fell 14 points.

Through its membership of the Commonwealth, the UK has links with 21 African countries. In the specific case of Gabon it [became](#) a member of the Commonwealth over a year ago when it became the 55th member.

UK businesses in the region and UK Government backed projects will be [impacted](#) by the military coups, including projects like the Niger-Benin pipeline. UK Foreign Direct Investment in Africa in 2019, stood at a decade high of nearly \$14bn, although [analysis](#) by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes that nearly 83 percent of UK investment stock in Africa is in the extractive industries of oil, gas, and mining, as well as in financial services.

The UK is home to a large African diaspora of [1.42m people](#) whose people to people links strengthen UK interests in Africa, but also increases the likelihood of UK nationals and their families becoming caught up in instability caused by military coups.

Partnership with African countries sits at the crossroads of countries critical minerals strategy, as the continent has [roughly](#) 85 percent of the world's manganese, 80 percent of the world's platinum and chromium, 47 percent of cobalt, 21 percent of graphite, and 6 percent of copper.

When it comes to migration and trade, the West African region's proximity to the Mediterranean means that any increase in conflict and instability will see a rise in migration and a disruption to trade. The European Union in the past has [noted](#) a rise in irregular migration to the Canary Islands via West African countries, although the numbers in 2020, 2021, and 2022 are significantly lower than a peak in 2006.

As a region, Africa [continues](#) to receive the largest share of the UK's Overseas Development Aid (ODA) budget (around 50.5% of ODA in 2021) despite government cuts to bilateral ODA spend to individual African countries.

It is estimated that Africa will be one of the most impacted continents when it comes to dealing with the effects of climate change and global population growth between now and 2030 will be the greatest in sub-saharan Africa.

The Government's original Integrated Review found that the rapid population growth of Africa will not be joined with rising levels of wealth and income. [By 2045 it is likely that 85% of the poorest billion people will live in Africa.](#)

Therefore, any UK climate prevention strategy or poverty reduction strategy must be targeted at working with African countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government should clarify its messaging when it comes to our values-based opposition to military coups and to working with military governments.

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The Government should support the immediate suspension of any member of the Commonwealth where a military coup takes place.

More broadly, we should seek to reform Commonwealth membership with a trade, regulatory, and visa component that demonstrates the economic value of membership and in return work to increase expectations that Commonwealth members will adhere to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This should include more funded scholarships for students at UK universities.

The Government should undertake polling and research to better understand the perception of UK foreign, development, trade, and defence policy in Africa, and work to ensure that investment and development aid are seen as partnerships with African host countries and not as a form of neo-colonialism.

UK Ministers should assess the issues like corruption that lead to demands for the Wagner Group's services in African countries in terms of military training, security assistance, and communications capabilities, and see if there are opportunities for the UK working with like minded partners to address them.

The Government should introduce further proactive measures to crackdown on the City of London being used by corrupt government ministers to hide wealth plundered from the state and work to return stolen wealth back to the countries of origin.

Ministers should consider using the Lancaster House format as an opportunity to discuss France's changing role in the West African region and to invite African leaders to discuss future defence and security partnerships as equals.

The Author:

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