Closing the Book on Africa’s First Generation Coups

JONATHAN POWELL and MWITA CHACHA

Abstract: The Zimbabwe Defence 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 Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) 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 liberation 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,” coups have become an increasing rarity.² No African state had witnessed a leader removed via a coup in over three years at the time of Mugabe’s removal.³ No regime had even experienced a failed coup attempt since Gilbert Diendéré’s ill-fated effort to seize power in Burkina Faso in September 2014.⁴ 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


Mwita Chacha is an assistant professor in Political Science and International Relations at Nazarbayev University. His research examines regional integration and intrastate security. His work has been published in Conflict Management and Peace Science, Democratization, European Union Politics, Journal of International Relations and Development, Journal of Peace Research, and Regional and Federal Studies.

http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i1a6.pdf

© University of Florida Board of Trustees, a public corporation of the State of Florida; permission is hereby granted for individuals to download articles for their own personal use. Published by the Center for African Studies, University of Florida.

ISSN: 2152-2448
generation of post-colonial leaders. Considering the fates of Africa’s initial independent leadership, or what we refer to here as the ‘old guard,’ 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 received independence from another African state (Eritrea, South Sudan, Cape Verde), or technically earned independence prior to this period (South Africa). This results in a sample of thirty-nine countries, of which twenty saw the old guard driven from power by a military coup.

However, the case also illustrates important differences. Of each of the twenty previous old guards 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 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 ZDF’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.”

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.” Even five years later, after removing Joseph Kasavubu, the international press did not take alarm over Mobutu’s actions. Reuters, for example, noted that “The thin, bespectacled young man does not look the role of the strong man.” 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." Within a week Amin backtracked on his promise, establishing himself as president and overseeing a calamitous eight-year reign.

Post-coup statements on the lack of political objectives are also frequently accompanied by concerted efforts to legitimize 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. Farcau specifically notes that putchists often go to great lengths to legitimize coups through securing resignations. 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.”

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 Benin during which participants overtly waived signs calling for his removal. Just two years later, protesters again called for the military to remove Justin Ahomadegbe. Kenneth Kaunda, meanwhile, was put in the awkward situation where civilians celebrated while thinking the long-time ruler had been toppled. Kaunda, of course, survived Mwamba Luchembe’s move 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. This project codes the manner of entering and exiting office, including 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 nineteen of the thirty-eight “old guards” 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 nineteen 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. 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.

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.\textsuperscript{16} 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).\textsuperscript{17} 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 old guards 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.\textsuperscript{18} 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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Fate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dem. Rep of Congo</td>
<td>Patrice Lumumba</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>Hubert Maga</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Togo</td>
<td>Sylvanus Olympio</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabon</td>
<td>Léon Mba</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>Maurice Yaméogo</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Kwame Nkrumah</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Abubakar Tafewa Balewa</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central African Republic</td>
<td>David Dacko</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>Mwambutsa IV</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>Modibo Keita</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Milton Obote</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>Grégoire Kayibanda</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>Hamani Diori</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>Francois Tombalbaye</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>Moktar Ould Daddah</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Imprisonment, exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>Francisco Macias Nguema</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea-Bissau</td>
<td>Luís Cabral</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesotho</td>
<td>Leabua Jonathan</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambia</td>
<td>Dawda Jawara</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Robert Mugabe</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 old guards, 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 old guards. He joins a 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. 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 that 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.19

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 old guards, 25 percent 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 percent 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 fifteen successful coups that have occurred under the AU.\textsuperscript{20}

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.

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. See Powell and Thyne 2011.
4 References to failed coup attempts are taken from Powell and Thyne 2011.
5 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 Frindethie 2016, p. 230.
8 Reuters 1965.
9 Otunnu 2016.
10 Farcau 1994.
16 Mazrui and Rothchild 1967.
17 Powell and Thyne 2011.
18 First 1971, p. 21.
19 The East African 2018.
20 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.

References


The East African. 2018. “Regional observers declare Zimbabwe election free and fair.” 1 August.


