



A Critical Appraisal of the Tragedies of Military Coups and Political Instability in Guinea (1984-2021)¹

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Abstract:

This article examines Guinean political instability and coups from 1984 to 2021, with a focus on events following the death of the country's first president, Touré, in 1984. This is a qualitative study using narrative and historical methods, drawing on documentary evidence, journal articles, textbooks, and online sources. This article contends that, from 1984 to 2021, coups and instability in Guinea have weakened the country's institutional political culture, undermined the constitution, and led to socioeconomic hardships and social polarization. The findings show that the political reality and military intervention in the country's politics cannot be intertwined with an ethnic configuration, but rather with the narrative and the dysfunctional nature of the Guinean political system. The study concludes that for Guinea to transition from the current military rule to civilian rule, it is essential to establish a constructive, participatory democracy that uses state resources for the common good of its citizens. This involves redistributing profits fairly among citizens without relying on ethnic divisions and investing in infrastructure for all, which is essential for political stability and growth.

Keywords:

Authoritarianism;
Democracy; Guinea;
Insecurity; Military
Coups.

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Introduction

Among the complex histories of independence in post-colonial African states, one of the most important is that of the West African nation of Guinea since its independence in 1957 (Whiteman, 1971). After gaining political independence in 1957 and the rise of President Ahmed Sekou Toure's government (1958–1984), through Lansana Conté Camara's rule (1984–2008), President Alpha Condé's administration (2010–2021), to Mamady Doumbouya's leadership (2021-present), the military has played a significant role in Guinean politics (Bah, 2015; Rosenje, Onyebuchi, and Adeniyi, 2021) than any countries in the sub-Saharan Africa. Given the country's abundant natural resources and following the assumption of military rule since the death and ouster of President Ahmed Sekou Toure in 1984, the military has effectively controlled the heart of Guinean politics for more than a quarter-century (Bah, 2015). Guinea's particularity and defining traits of protracted instability are underscored by the long illness of President Conté, which caused a power vacuum, and deep crisis, characterized by weak governance, distrust and serious economic and financial misappropriation, limited capacity of the State to mitigate threats to the population, failed local institutions, and country's proximity to border conflicts (Foumbi, 2012). Despite its internal challenges, its small population, and being in the West African region, where countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire, had experienced civil wars fuelled by natural resources and humanitarian crises, Guinea remains one of the few countries in West Africa that has avoided large-scale, deadly, and humanitarian crises over the past decades in its political affairs with structural problems that have threatened to shatter its fragile peace (Kanafani, 2006) in decades. Nevertheless, the relative peace and the absence of civil war or major conflicts, as witnessed under both the military regimes and short-lived civilian rule in Guinea, in contrast to its volatile neighbours in the West African sub-region, could be likened to a graveyard, characterized by dysfunctional State institutions.

The above raises the question of why and how the prolonged military rule and the alarming poverty rate have contributed to Guinea's political instability since 1984. There is also the question of whether, and to what extent, the military's engagement in Guinea's political affairs since 1984 is a function of the failure of the civilian government and political institutions to stabilize the economy and obey the rule of law, rather than the issue of ethnic polarization within the military, as the driver of military intervention, as much of the existing scholarly literature has argued (Mandian, Daud & Kamaruddin, 2017; Bah, 2016; Ammann & Kaufmann, 2012). Although the ethnic narrative of Civil-Military relations and the military incursion into African politics is long overdue, the conventional reality underpinning the failure of African political institutions to organize and administer an egalitarian political order has been a longstanding issue confronting the continent since decolonization. However, looking at the relatively under-researched case of Guinea's political instability, underpinned by the involvement of the military institution in the country's politics since 1984, this paper argues that the political reality and dynamics of the Guinean political trajectory and instability cannot be intertwined with an ethnic configuration, but rather the narrative and the function of the



dysfunctional nature of the Guinean political system. Thus, this paper examines Guinea's political instability and military involvement in politics following the death of its first executive President, Ahmed Sekou Toure, in 1984.

This paper contributes to the existing debate about Guinea's political affairs. It contributes to evidence-based historical analysis of political events by highlighting the chain of socioeconomic and political factors that have fuelled the country's political instability since its early years of political independence. Also, it contributes to the scholarly debate on understanding the factors behind Guinea's political instability and military coups by proffering diagnostic remedies and measures to address its political challenges and return to democratic, elected governance. It explores the political evolution of Guinea, including military involvement, term extensions, and constitutional crises from 1984 to 2021.

The literature on Guinean political instability since 1984 has examined the significance of the ethnic wedge crisis, such as practices of ethnic manipulation within security institutions, as the leading cause of coup attempts (Harkness, 2016; Ammann, 2012; Kanafani, 2006; Kposowa & Jenkins, 1993). However, there is limited systematic analysis examining the theoretical and empirical links between societal conditions that enable coups and the dominance of military institutions in African politics (Bukari & Braimah, 2023; Wells, 1974). This literature tends to essentialize ethnicity, viewing it as the primary driver of coups d'état and long-lasting rule in Guinea, rather than recognizing it as a social condition rooted in Guinea's socio-economic and authoritarian context from 1984 to 2023. This oversight prevents scholars and analysts from gaining a complete and nuanced understanding of Guinean coups and political instability within the development framework. It also limits the consideration of socio-economic factors and the guardian perspective, which sees these as the main motivating forces behind military coups and constitutional violations in Guinea since 1984.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section One explains the conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Section Two examines the country's early political history. The third section traces the development of military intervention in Guinea's politics. Section Four investigates the political transition and the roles of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) in Guinean politics. Section Five discusses democracy in disguise and the state of chaos in Guinea. Section Six considers the political environment surrounding tenure extensions and the decline of democracy in Guinea. Section Seven focuses on the end of authoritarian rule and the disruption of democracy in Guinea, while the final section offers a conclusion.

Conceptual and Theoretical Discussion

Coup d'État

In this study, I define coup d'état as the sudden and violent overthrow of an existing government by a faction or small group within the armed forces (McGowan, 2003). While a coup d'état can involve illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to remove the sitting official (Powell & Thyne, 2011), I use

this concept to illustrate both successful and attempted removals of the chief executive or head of state (including his assassination), the displacement of regime officials or leaders by the coup perpetrators, the suspension of constitutional order, and even the dissolution of legislatures and banning of political parties in Guinea from 1984 to 2025.

Modernization Theory

According to modernization theory (Huntington, 2006), postcolonial states, or new nations that have emerged from imperial socio-economic and political dominance, have struggled with economic development, social mobilization, and political participation among the people. As postcolonial societies, they inherited weak institutional systems characterized by patrimonial and clientelist practices that lacked enough coherence to govern effectively (Huntington, 2006). Many African nation-states have manipulated and adopted constitutional autocracies characterized by factionalized multiparty systems, resulting in political divisions, deadlocks, and unresponsive governments. When civilian regimes fail to keep up with socio-economic progress and mass political involvement, the military often intervenes and enacts exclusionary measures, which then trigger further political instability (Jenkins and Kposowa, 1990). From a development or governance standpoint, analysts in this school of thought argue that coups d'état happen when the military believes that either the economy or regime legitimacy is in crisis. In such cases, coup plotters see it as an unavoidable and illegal action – the only way to save the situation (Londregan & Poole, 1990; Belkin & Schofer, 2003; Thyne, 2010). For instance, after the failed coup attempt against Liberian President Samuel Doe, Thomas Quiwonkpa was “captured, tortured, castrated, dismembered, and parts of his body publicly eaten by Doe’s victorious troops” (Hubband, quoted in Thyne & Powell, 2016). To purge and save the system, Doe ruthlessly murdered about 3,000 members of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups in retaliation. In military coups, leaders seeking regime change often prefer to exhaust other legal avenues before resorting to violence (Thyne & Powell, 2016).

Development Thesis and Guardian Perspective

The guardian perspective on a coup d'état suggests that the military intervenes in politics to protect the nation from widespread discontent and a lack of progress in nation-building, which is exacerbated by tribalism and the systemic failure of the civilian ruling elite (Onwumehili, 1988) to promote development, integration, and a cohesive political culture within the state. For instance, Wiking (1983) notes that the coup launched and executed by Major General Juvenal Habyarimana in Rwanda in 1973 was justified solely on the grounds of ongoing national polarization and disunity during President Gregoire Kayibanda's leadership. Similarly, Idi Amin's military intervention in Uganda in 1971 aimed to prevent further deterioration of Ugandan leader Milton Obote's ethnic policies against the Ganda people.



McBride (2004) and Collier and Hoeffler (2007) emphasize internal factors within the military that contribute to coups d'état. McBride (2004) argues that the military intervenes in politics, driven by personal greed and motivated by a desire for wealth and privilege, leading them to seize power or control state resources. According to Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2007), the motivations for violent military coups in Africa are rooted in economic, political, and social grievances. Regarding the difference between rebellion and coup from a grievance perspective, the military establishment is considered part of the state. In the African context, it is often integrated into the clientelist and primordial state structure. Collier and Hoeffler note that rebellions and coups against civilian regimes tend to occur when the military is excluded from power and its benefits. Furthermore, government policies of sectional redistribution are likely to favour and provoke the section or group that dominates the military.

Methodology

The scope of this study is Guinea, which has experienced more political instability and military coups than any other country in sub-Saharan Africa since the post-colonial period. Since the death of Guinea's longest-serving president, Sékou Touré, in 1984, the country has been embroiled in a political quagmire and a democratic deficit. Bah (2015) notes that since Guinea gained independence in 1958, the country has faced threats to its stability stemming from deep-seated divisions among its major ethnic groups, which are aligned along clear cultural fault lines. Guinea is also one of the West African countries plagued by constitutional tinkering, tenure elongation, and military intervention, which have not only endangered democratic stability and consolidation but also threaten the sustainability of democracy in the West African sub-region (Rosenje, Onyebuchi, and Adeniyi, 2022). While the historical and ongoing political instability in Guinea is not unique itself, other West African states such as Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and Chad have also been experiencing military coups. However, given the history of political instability and successive military coups in Guinea, ECOWAS's sanctions have been ineffective and counterproductive in stopping the wave of coups in the region. The data collection method for this study is qualitative, relying on secondary sources, and the analysis was conducted using historical and thematic approaches.

Guinea and its Early Political History

An examination of Guinea's political histories, regimes, and military coups highlights how leadership has extended its tenure and manipulated the constitution to stay in power. Since gaining independence in 1957 and the rise of Ahmed Sekou Toure's regime (1958–1984), Guinea has struggled with threats to stability stemming from polarization among its main ethnic groups (Bah, 2015). Successive leaders have faced insecurity due to the region's unstable neighbours in the Sahel. Ahmed Sekou Toure, the first elected President of Guinea, governed from 1958 until he died in 1984. Under the slogan of "freedom in poverty rather than slavery in affluence," he rallied the population to vote

95.5% “no” against maintaining ties with France. Subsequently, accusations of destabilization plots against regional rivals, including Côte d’Ivoire’s Houphouët Boigny, Senegal, and France, became common. These accusations culminated in the failed 1971 invasion led by Portuguese officers based in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (Kamara, 2001). Ironically, with the active involvement of the National Militia, Toure stayed in power despite polarization and politicization within the military.

The militia was alleged to have been 'materially spoiled' by President Toure, weakening the army's ability to perform its national duties despite resource shortages and blockades from the East. Recognized alongside the Guinean army, the militia played a key role in repelling the Portuguese-led attack on Guinea on 22 November 1970. After defending against the invasion, the National Militia was further strengthened and placed directly under the Presidency's supervision, with minimal ties to the Ministry of National Defence (Bah, 2015). Given the continuous dominance of the Guinean National Militia in the country's political life and defence apparatus, amid divisions within the army, President Ahmed Sékou Touré's 26-year rule (1958–1984) was marked by violence against political opponents. Many prominent activists and opponents he suspected of disloyalty were either forced into exile or killed (Bangura, 2018).

Furthermore, as economic conditions worsened, insecurity, smuggling, and illegal market activities increased; Touré's public trust and support steadily declined. His actions no longer impressed most Guineans, who faced a deteriorating standard of living. Touré aimed to meet and satisfy the demand for improved economic conditions without losing his tight control over the nation. However, despite some economic reforms he introduced for the masses, the changes implemented in late 1982 triggered significant upheaval, ultimately leading to the 3 April 1984 coup d'état, which ended thirty years of Touré's government since 1958. On 26 March 1984, Touré died in a hospital in Cleveland, Ohio (United States), where he was undergoing heart surgery following a major heart attack (O'Toole & Baker, 2005). The military, which Touré had built and equipped for regime stability and to defend the nation against invasions and existential threats, later turned against the state and overthrew his government due to ongoing political repression, authoritarianism, and declining socio-economic development.

The Journey of Military Intervention in Guinean Politics

The military intervention in Guinean politics began after the death of Touré and the removal of Louis Lansana Beavogui, who had succeeded Touré as interim president. However, because little has changed since Touré's death and because of the insecurity posed by unstable neighbouring countries bordering Guinea, as well as Touré's failure to build democratic institutions that ensure peaceful political transitions, Beavogui's interim government was short-lived. It was overthrown on 3 April 1984 by the military led by Lieutenant Colonel Lansana Conté (Darboe, 2010). Ordinances, decrees, and presidential declarations govern the new military regime. It established the Military Committee of National Recovery (CMRN), which drafted the new constitution and



created the Supreme Court of Guinea in 1990. The government pledged to liberalize the economy and promote foreign direct investment to utilize the country's natural resources (Darboe, 2010). As the economy continued to decline, and after his newly formed Party of Unity and Progress (PUP) won the elections of 1993 and 1998 with over 51% and 71.4% of votes cast respectively, Conté announced in mid-June 2000 his plan to hold a referendum to amend the constitution, enabling him to run for a third term (Darboe, 2010; O'Toole & Baker, 2005). Amid international pressure, widespread social movements, and pro-democracy protests, the Conté government introduced a new constitution, which was adopted by referendum in 1990 (Camara, 2016).

On 30 June 2002, the Guinean legislative elections were reported to be marred by irregularities and boycotted by opposition parties led by Alpha Condé and Sidia Touré. Subsequently, his third disputed election on 21 December 2003 was followed by strikes and demonstrations in 2006 and 2007. The long-time president, after severe repressions and brutality that caused thousands of injuries and deaths, finally bowed to the unrest and pressure from the population, appointing a Prime Minister chosen by unions and civil society organizations (Bangoura, 2015). News about Conté's health that emerged in September 2004 resembled the case of President Sekou Touré's final hours. During his rule, Conté seemed to play a political game of managing factions against each other to prevent anyone in his government from unseating him. His failure to groom a successor led to political instability after his death (Darboe, 2010; O'Toole & Baker, 2005).

In the context of a worsening, stagnant national economy, as experienced throughout Conté's administration, multiparty politics was introduced amid unfavourable terms and conditions imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for economic reform. A socio-economic crisis and a lack of free and fair elections made democratization impossible. They hampered the process from 1993 to the end of Conté's presidency in 2008, with international and regional organizations employing "stick-and-carrot" diplomacy to manage the situation and eventually achieve lasting stability. The interventions of both international and regional organizations that were crucial in bringing relative peace and stability proved more significant after Conté's death on 22 December 2008, when an unknown army captain named Moussa Dadis Camara – until then barely recognized and unknown outside military circles – staged a coup "on behalf of a junta called Conseil national pour la démocratie et le développement (CNDD) [National Council for Democracy and Development]" and unseated Conté (Souare, 2009).

As a standard practice among all military juntas during a coup, the new military regime announced the dissolution of the National Assembly and then suspended the state constitution. While the military juntas were said to have received widespread support across the country and from Guineans living abroad, the coup was condemned and opposed by the international community, including the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (Souare, 2009). The new military regime quickly began dissolving the national legislature and suspending the constitution;

rumours suggested rivalry and disunity could cause tension between Daddis Camara's supporters and opponents, and looming economic challenges may threaten Guinea's future stability. Although Camara initially appointed a civilian prime minister and promised to transfer power back to civilians within six months, in August 2009, elections were postponed from late 2009 to early 2010. He also expressed his intention to run for president, contradicting his earlier statement that neither he nor any other members of the CNDD would seek office during the elections. Following these events, on 28 September 2009, soldiers opened fire on protesters gathered in various locations in Conakry who were protesting the CNDD and Daddis Camara's alleged presidential ambitions. It is estimated that the death toll exceeded 150 persons, and reports indicate that many women were raped and dehumanized by soldiers (Arieff & Cook, 2009). Once again, the international community did not hesitate to press against Camara's regime. For example, after the September 28 crackdown, the United States condemned Camara's actions, called for his resignation, and announced visa sanctions against CNDD members and other supporters. Similarly, the AU, the ECOWAS, and the EU imposed arms and economic embargoes, with the AU and EU implementing additional targeted sanctions on CNDD members and affiliates (Arieff & Cook, 2009) to destabilize the regime and prevent a return to civilian rule.

Despite regional and international efforts following the 2008 coup, it can be argued that the actions were mainly aimed at restoring democracy and constitutional governance rather than preventing massacres and atrocities, leaving many perpetrators unprosecuted and atrocity risk factors unaddressed in Guinea (Stefan, 2021). As divisions and unrest grew within the military ranks of Camara's-led junta, with increasing tensions and crackdowns on Guineans, dialogue about the democratic transition process broke down: the junta blocked the creation of a National Transitional Council – a crucial step toward civilian rule; media and political discussions were banned; civil society organizations and political party leaders became targets of military crackdowns; intimidation and the formation of CNDD-related militias across the country created a destabilizing environment locally and fostered mistrust among military perpetrators (Kaye, 2018). Camara's lack of commitment to genuinely returning the government to civilian control, along with ongoing delays in electoral preparations, fuelled suspicions and fears among many CNDD members and Camara's supporters that the junta was hesitant to relinquish power (Arieff & Cook, 2009). While Camara maintained control amid human rights abuses, sanctions, membership suspensions, and the ICC's preliminary investigation cast doubt on his regime, stigmatizing the junta and its allies, further emphasizing Guinea's departure from human rights principles, and isolating the country from the international community (Stefan, 2021).

Following a series of domestic revulsions and intense outside condemnation, and amidst the brutality of the Camara-led regime, it is recorded that "tens of thousands of Guineans were victims of political violence. Thousands more were imprisoned for opposing the government, and federal forces drove as many as one million citizens into exile" (Fogarty, 2010). Captain Camara was shot in the head by his aide-de-camp,



Aboubacar Sidiki Diakité, in December 2010. Camara was flown out of Guinea for treatment. Later, the de facto leadership, led by General Sékouba Konaté, who was reportedly not in Guinea during the massacre, quickly acquiesced and adopted a reconciliatory stance (Harsch, 2010). The failed assassination of Moussa Dadis Camara on 3 December 2009, carried out by Aboubacar Sidiki Diakité, destabilized and unsettled the country, which was already on the verge of collapse and disintegration after four decades of political turmoil (Koko, 2010).

It is important to recognize that ECOWAS diplomatic efforts were part of the broader and concerted actions of the international community, which were deeply involved in maintaining peace and stability in West Africa (Camara, 2016). From this perspective, and following transitional guidelines, the two parties brokered a peace agreement on 15 January 2010. Captain Camara and General Konaté signed an agreement in which Camara agreed to stay in exile. General Konaté promised to consult Guinea's political parties, civil society, and unions to prepare for a democratic transition (Harsch, 2010).

Political Transition and the Role of ECOWAS and the African Union

After a long period of democratic deficit and political instability in Guinea, on 27 June 2010, with support from the ECOWAS, the AU, and the International Coalition on Guinea, under the leadership of General Konaté, Guinea peacefully held its first democratic elections amid allegations of election fraud and an inconclusive result that sparked protests and clashes by demonstrators against security forces (Obi, 2011; Kikoler, 2015). However, after the first round held on June 27, the two leading candidates, Cellou Diallo and Alpha Condé, qualified for a second, "decisive round," scheduled for 19 September 2010, which was postponed due to political infighting (Engel, 2010). Although run-off elections took place in November, the leading candidates fuelled an ethnic political crisis, tensions, and polarization along ethnic lines: "the former represented the Malinke (believed to have produced all presidents to date and well represented in the junta), and the latter represented the Peul or Fulani ethnic group" (which had not produced a president) (Obi, 2011).

Moreover, the two leading candidates have different political backgrounds: Condé is a long-standing opposition leader and politician who spent time in exile, particularly after Guinea's post-independence period. Meanwhile, Diallo was widely seen as a political insider (Arieff, 2014). However, after the November run-off election, amid protests, objections, and accusations from the opposition, Alpha Condé was declared the winner. The new government took steps to calm the unrest that marred the election. At the same time, international observers noted that the overall conduct of the election was acceptable, though they highlighted challenges related to logistics, delays in the run-off, ethnic tensions, and election-related violence (Obi, 2011; Arieff, 2014). Therefore, Guinea successfully transitioned from military rule to democratic governance following highly contested elections in 2010. Still, the sustainability of this new democracy under President Alpha Condé's leadership will depend on the government's ability to address

societal contradictions constructively, fairly, and inclusively. This involves engaging the country's diverse groups and stakeholders, as will be discussed in the next section.

Democracy in Disguise and a State of Anarchy

Following the turmoil and political experimentation after Guinea's era of military autocracy and authoritarianism, and amid ongoing tensions from 2009 to 2010, a political transition occurred in 2010. Alpha Condé was elected Guinea's first democratically elected president in November 2010 and later re-elected in October 2015 for a second term. Additionally, local elections were finally held in February 2018, after a thirteen-year delay (Kaye, 2018). Both the 2010 and 2015 presidential elections reportedly experienced violence; several people were killed, and serious clashes broke out between security forces and opposition parties, while legislative elections were postponed multiple times (Stefan, 2021). Following the political unrest and insecurity that preceded the electoral process that brought President Alpha Condé to power, President Condé, who was declared the winner of the 2010 election, announced and requested a complete overhaul and reform of the national security system through the creation of a Security Sector Reform Advisory Team (SSRAT) to provide strategic guidance to the national government (Kaye, 2018). Central to Guinea's successive regimes are: the civilian autocracy of President Sékou Touré, who led Guinea from independence in 1957 until he died in 1984; the military and authoritarian regimes (1984-2008) under General-President Lansana Conté; and finally, the regime (2008-2009) of Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, who was ousted from power after a failed coup attempt and an assassination attempt on his life. President Alpha Condé became the first political leader in Guinea to demonstrate clear commitment and political will toward security sector governance, with support from various state and non-state actors (Bangoura, 2015; Kaye, 2018). Later, President Condé established the National Human Rights Commission, led by Mamady Kaba, "a civil society activist and former president of the Guinean chapter of the African Assembly for the Defence of Human Rights," aimed at improving the country's human rights situation (Bangoura, 2015). Despite security reforms, the justice system remains very weak, as growing concerns and allegations by Human Rights Watch highlight human rights abuses, "including the beating to death of two men and the rape of a woman by mobs linked to the opposition" (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The elections were highly controversial and were followed by widespread protests and political violence, with the opposition boycotting (Philipps, 2021). During Alpha Condé's second term, impunity was extended to the security sector and militias involved in criminal acts and violent activities, including "the alleged killing by the security forces of some 130 unarmed demonstrators in 2007, some 60 opposition supporters protesting the delay in holding parliamentary elections in 2013-14, and at least 10 people in the run-up to the 2015 presidential poll" (World Report, quoted in Kaye, 2018).

The Political Climate of Tenure Elongation and the End of a Failed Democracy

A referendum on constitutional reforms and amendments was held during President Conté's rule on 11 November 2001. In this vote, 98.4% of ballots supported President Conté's bid for a third term, extending his tenure from a five-year limit to a ten-year limit, despite an opposition boycott (Heath-Brown, 2015). Although the attempt to secure a third term did not succeed during President Conté's administration, rumours have circulated in political discussions since President Condé's second term in 2015, suggesting he would seek a third term by amending the constitution. Condé pointed out that the 2010 constitution lacked legitimacy because it was adopted under the National Transitional Council and "had not been submitted to a referendum; therefore, it was not 'legally constitutional'" (Philipps, 2021). Although the world hoped that Guinea's transition to democracy in 2010 would strengthen its democratic processes in future elections, it did not achieve the expected success. For example, many diplomatic missions and authorities in Guinea made multiple efforts to persuade Condé not to pursue a third term and to ensure free, fair elections with an equal playing field for all political parties. However, he rejected these efforts from the international community, leading to consequences that undermined the democratic process and electoral laws. Condé took drastic measures and encouraged the military to strike (Ilo, 2022), allowing him to run for another presidential term. The 22 March 2019 referendum on a third term resulted in 89.76% of votes in favour. However, it was challenged by the EU, ECOWAS, the US, and the AU, all of which declined to oversee the referendum because one-third of registered voters lacked official voting materials. Condé and his party, RPG – Rassemblement du Peuple Guinéen – organized a strategic move commonly used by many African leaders to cling to power as "life presidents".

President Condé's drive and ambition to serve a third term and alter the constitution faced significant obstacles and are an exception. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, President Ouattara secured a third term after a flawed constitutional debate, "with regional bodies papering over the fundamental flaws of the process and its grave consequences for the country's post-civil war reconciliation" (Ilo, 2022). When President Talon of Benin amended the constitution to facilitate his re-election, he faced no pushback from regional bodies, and dissenting voices within Benin were ignored (Ilo, 2022). The case of President Condé changing the constitution to pursue a third term took on a different dimension from that of his counterparts, who had successfully amended their constitutions to extend their tenures in sub-Saharan Africa.

Condé's approach reflected a political strategy to shift the narrative around his third-term bid into an ethnic-religious power play (Bangura, 2022). Meanwhile, amid fierce demonstrations, protests, and calls for ECOWAS to restore constitutional order and democracy in Guinea, civil society organizations, youth groups, the National Front for the Defence of the Constitution (NLF), and the Guinean opposition mobilized protesters and activists demanding the resignation of Alpha Condé (Ghirardello & Benedikter, 2020). Since Condé's counterparts in other sub-Saharan countries had secured their

terms without facing state backlash, Condé's efforts to extend his tenure took a different path. He leveraged the state machinery to pass a referendum on March 22, which led to the presidential election on 18 October 2020. Amid the polarization and tension following his successful bid for a third term, opposition parties had no choice but to participate in the elections. All Guinean nationals living abroad, including in France, Switzerland, and Germany, criticized the elections, deeming them undemocratic and fraudulent (Ghirardello & Benedikter, 2020).

The End of the Authoritarian Reign and the Truncation of Democracy

Incumbent President Alpha Condé won the election with 59.5% of the vote, followed by the leading opposition candidate, Cello Dalein Diallo of the United Democratic Forces of Guinea (UFDG), who received 33.49% (Amoah, 2023). Meanwhile, the constitutional limits for Condé's two-term presidency expired in 2020. It is essential to recall that the March 22 referendum revised the maximum term limits to three terms, thereby enabling Condé's re-election in October 2020. However, in the interest of Guinea's democratic principles, on 5 September 2021, an American-trained military officer, Mamady Doumbouya, led a coup d'état to overthrow President Alpha Condé (Thrall & Cohen, 2021), ending his eleven-year rule in Guinea (Ilo 2022). The junta justified Condé's ouster based on constitutional violations, human rights abuses, poor socio-economic performance, insecurity, and financial mismanagement (Adetuyi, 2022). Doumbouya then became president of the National Committee for Reconciliation and Development, known as the Comité National de Rassemblement et du Développement (CNRD). On 28 September 2021, he was sworn in as interim president. Mohamed Beavogui, a former UN employee and agricultural expert, was also sworn in on 6 October 2021, as interim prime minister (Benedikter, 2021). Furthermore, Doumbouya's commitment to returning power to civilians included a pledge to rely heavily on the interim prime minister, to ensure that no member or associate of the CNRD would run for elective office in future elections, and that a return to democratic order was expected in early 2022 (Benedikter & Barry, 2021).

The African Union, as usual, responded by issuing a statement condemning the coup and calling for the military junta to release Condé (Ginsburg, 2022). The AU and ECOWAS responded by suspending Guinea's membership. Meanwhile, the US expressed concern that the ECOWAS bloc has not made progress in establishing a transitional timeline or organizing elections, as previously agreed upon by the military junta (US Department of State, 2021; Samb, 2012). It is also important to note that the coup was welcomed by some Guineans who saw it as an end to the atrocities and impunity committed by Condé. For example, Guinea's prominent opposition leader, Cellou Dalein Diallo, supported the military coup, saying it represented a new beginning for Guinea and expressing his readiness to participate in a transition to a new government (BBC, 2021; Samb, 2012).

The military overthrow by the junta and their commitment to restore Guinea to civil rule since 2021 have received mixed reactions from both local and international



communities. For example, Nzally (2022) argues that many political transitions in Africa often hinder and delay the possibility of holding transparent and credible elections due to instability, political violence, coups, and authoritarianism. Similarly, political developments such as military coups or conflicts in many African countries, including Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), Gabon (2023), Liberia (2011 to date), Somalia (1991 to date), Mali (2021 to date), and Chad (2021 to 2025), have led to election delays and an unstable democratic transition to civil rule. Thus, democratic transition in these countries has remained uncertain due to a fragile, unstable political environment (Nzally, 2022), as evidenced by numerous military coups and conflicts across Africa. Consequently, since the military's takeover of Guinea in September 2021, the situation has remained unchanged.

Similarly, Guineans welcomed the coup to address the wrongs committed by the deposed Condé and to restore constitutional order. In that case, the question remains whether the coup plotters are prepared to meet the transition's deadline. Additionally, there is concern about ECOWAS and the AU's ability to restore constitutional order, enforce sanctions, and ensure compliance with the framework on unconstitutional changes of government in Guinea. However, given the failures and experience of both the AU and ECOWAS in conflict management, condemning coups, and restoring democracy in Africa, except Gambia (2017), Sierra Leone (1997-98), and Burkina Faso (2015), it is unlikely that the current military junta in Guinea will soon return the country to constitutional governance. Benedikter (2022) supports this view and notes that the young military junta has tasted power and is being encouraged by their families, allies, cronies, and ethnic groups "towards securing spaces of influence and thus cannot, or does not want to, organise a transition quickly to hand over responsibility to civilian representatives."

Conclusion

This paper examines the impacts stemming from Guinea's long history of failed socioeconomic development, weak institutional structures, and political control by military and civilian regimes from 1984 to 2021. As discussed in this paper, considering Guinea's history of coups from 1984 to 2021, successive military juntas and authoritarian civilian governments have predominantly shared power, often citing the need to protect the country from insecurity, economic hardship, and political corruption by elites. However, public support for coups is closely linked to Guinea's ongoing political instability. Democracy suffers when elected governments fail to uphold fundamental democratic principles, such as free speech, regular elections, and economic prosperity for the people. As demonstrated in many African countries, the justification for military coups in Guinea since 1984 has frequently been the need to save the nation from imminent collapse. In many cases, the various military regimes in Guinea since 1984 have failed to demonstrate strong political will and commitment to transforming the country. For example, as Phillips (2022) argues, since Doumbouya's installation as military Head of State in 2021, "critical voices from civil society and political parties

remained few and low.” The various military regimes in Guinea have deprived the country of an effective institutionalized political system and culture, disrespected the constitution, and caused socio-economic hardships and social polarization.

This paper highlights important policy implications and historical reflection from Guinea’s political instability since 1984. For example, as noted by Koonings and Kruijt (2002), military regimes have become synonymous with widespread violation of human rights and repression by the state security apparatus against their population, unaccountable and corrupt governments, and illegitimate status within the international community. After the transition to civil rule in 2010 and following a 2008 military coup and decades of authoritarian governance, Guinea’s political landscape has been characterized by political corruption, crackdown on dissent, and flagrant abuse of citizens by the State Special Security Forces. Since September 2021, coup leaders have delayed the transition to civilian rule, with increased incarceration of critics and brutalization of protesters (Freedom House, 2024). The coups in Guinea have not led to significant changes or positive developments, as successive military juntas have often claimed to justify their actions. Likewise, the brief periods of civilian rule in the country have not improved the system but have instead taken it in the wrong direction. Ultimately, what the future holds for Guinea’s political transition remains uncertain, and it is doubtful that the current transitional military government will yield to pressure from regional and international organizations to restore constitutional governance. The military’s involvement for four decades underscores the country’s unusual endurance of a long period of internal peace in the absence of a democratic order, compared with other West African nations with relatively stable democracies that have experienced devastating civil wars and political violence.

Guinean society is currently in a transition phase, and it is essential to establish a constructive and effective participatory democracy to use state resources for the common good. This involves redistributing profits fairly among citizens without relying on ethnic divisions and investing in infrastructure for all, which is essential for political stability and growth. Furthermore, aligning Guinea’s financial, mining, industrial, and economic policies with those of open democratic societies, rather than with those of authoritarian powers such as Russia or China, could help Guinea move toward meaningful development and build closer ties with Western democracies (Benedikter, 2022). However, the case of Guinean political instability since 1984 is not an exception in the current political landscape in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the unfolding political dynamics, the rise of illiberal democracies, such as Cameroon, Mozambique, Mali, Cote d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and military coups in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, threaten Western democracy in the absence of strong sub-regional and regional institutions to enforce compliance with the norms of the liberal order. It appears that the way African leaders practice democracy differs from that in the West. ECOWAS and the AU must fulfil their mandate to promote and strengthen democracy in the region, as many have criticized these organizations’ inability and inefficiency in enforcing democracy and imposing sanctions against many authoritarian



civilian African leaders, who often provoke the military to overthrow them due to poor socio-economic conditions, corruption, insecurity, and electoral crises ravaging the region. Given the peculiar and resilient nature of Guinea's military rule and short-lived democracy from 1984 to 2021, further research could extend beyond the study's findings by examining the role of key external factors, such as the USA, France, and the United Nations, in Guinea, particularly in the context of the absence of internal political violence and a devastating civil war that may have been triggered by persistent military incursions into the country's politics since the past decades.

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Notes on Contributor

Dr. Bakare earned his PhD on international relations from the University of Aberdeen, UK, and has held teaching and research roles at various universities in Nigeria and the United Kingdom. Dr. Bakare has played key roles in academic forums within his field and has presented at many international conferences. He recently serviced as a visiting scholar and researcher in International Relations at the Department of Politics, School of Global and International Affairs, State University of New York at Oswego, New York, USA. He has also been a Visiting Fellow in Security and Statecraft at the London School of Economics and Political Science's Department of International Relations, UK. Additionally, he has served as a Teaching Associate, Seminar Leader, and Visiting Fellow in international affairs at Durham University's School of Government and International Affairs in Durham.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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