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FROM MILITARY AUTHORITARIANISM TO CIVILIAN DEMOCRACY: A CRITICAL TAXONOMY

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Africa's military governments can be described and classified according to different criteria, considering the ways in which they have taken and legitimize their power, or the role they played or they are playing in the passage from military authoritarianism to indirect democracy. In any case, the antithesis between military government and civilian democracy shouldn't be taken for granted, as shown by the recent taxonomy of power which categorises today's African military on the basis of their capabilities as enablers, providers and followers of the neoliberal democratic agenda. Therefore, the real problem is not represented by the army per se, but by the military and civilian rule capacity to include the dimension of social justice into the democratic system. In today's Africa the real difference between a "good" and a "bad" government depends on the definition that is given to the term "democracy", and much less on the involvement or not of the military in the government.

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The Military's Involvement in Politics

In Africa, during the 1960s and 1970s, guns and guerrillas were used both as an instrument of liberation from colonial rule and imperial masters, but also, in post-independence Africa, as an instrument of intervention in politics – undermining and frequently usurping civilian rule. During 1970s – according to many a decade which saw a peak in the military's involvement in politics in Africa – there were more than 30 such changes of government led by the military¹. The common denominator in these military-led changes of government was their “unconstitutionality”: they occurred outside the rule of law established by the Constitution. Almost no African Heads of State were ousted by the ballot box during that decade.

Historically, like the countries they represent, Africa's military governments can be distinguished from each other in a number of different ways. There have been those military regimes – the regime in Mali being a recent example – which have come to power unconstitutionally, and without a real popular basis. These are called “usurpers”. In these cases, the regime remains generally vulnerable to further coups. Where military insurgency reveals the absence or incapacity of civilian leadership to effectively control portions of the country and its people, when the military government is not capable of addressing this very same issue, usually its time in power is very short-lived.

A second category comprises the “legitimators” where anti-colonial guerrilla groups have taken power entering into government in civilian clothing and with civilian Constitutions. The military was assigned a role as an organ of power – along with the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. For this reason, these States are considered to have a “military” form of government. Usually, the highest-ranking figures in these types of government are ex-combatants – including presidents and prime ministers. This category includes countries such as Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe – and to a certain extent Algeria. A history of the liberation struggle invariably shows that the army and especially its leadership, not necessarily coincident with the fighters in the bush, tend to invest in one party and one electoral outcome. Given the consequent deterioration in the rule of law, these military management often leads to a decrease in investment and economic opportunities, apart from those cases where the presence of immense natural resources makes the situation artificially different.

A third group is formed by those “redempted” countries with a history of military rule, where civilians govern with a certain degree of confi-

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¹ See the database produced by the Centre for Systemic Peace that lists the coups d'états in African States since independence: <http://www.systemicpeace.org/africa/ACPPAnnex2b.pdf> (accessed 19/02/13).

dence that a return to military rule is “impossible” (although nothing is impossible) at least in the short-medium term. They include: Nigeria, Liberia, Benin, Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso. Nigeria for instance – Africa’s most populous nation and the continent’s most important oil producer – has experienced eight coups d’état, i.e. military rule has continued virtually uninterrupted for 33 years from 1966 to the end of the Nineties.

The armed forces, while normally justifying their political role on the grounds of providing stability, have in fact sometimes become the principal source of insecurity in the very societies they were supposed to protect. Soldiers and officers, under military governments, have often acted above the law and their political actions have gone unchecked by the judiciary as well as by the legislative.

However, there exists a notable difference between the military leftist governments and the pro-Western ones: namely, in the first case, the local population have been less negatively affected by the army’s actions. Soldiers in socialist countries such as Mozambique or Benin – to mention but two cases – were highly indoctrinated with the socialist ideal and many of them were indeed of humble origins. In these countries the colonial armies were completely dismissed and substituted with a new one that the common people on the whole supported. Two such examples in this respect are: Ghana after the coup d’état led by Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings in 1979 and Burkina Faso after the armed forces took power under Captain Thomas Sankara in 1983. These coup leaders saw their role as “agents for redemption” in the name of the people. Their objective was that to fight social injustice and address widespread corruption. The reforms adopted in Ghana included the re-nationalisation of schools and hospitals and at the same time the decentralisation of government. In Burkina Faso, similarly, the military government introduced popular reforms such as the abolition of chiefly privileges and the improvement of women’s rights (including very forward-looking programmes aimed at AIDS prevention, when the study of the HIV phenomenon was still at an early stage).

Current Developments in the Role of the Military

Today much has changed, and for those who believe in democracy as an exercise of indirect representation, it is fair to state that things have improved dramatically. Multi-party elections are now the norm across Africa. No fewer than 40 of sub-Saharan Africa’s 49 countries regularly organize such polls. For many this is a true measure of democratic progress in spite of their often-imperfect nature.

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well with the concept of “democracy” which is regarded as a positive concept – occurred in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War that in Africa had had major political effects within the national borders of individual States.

The change from military to civilian rule was produced by mounting pressure from outside as well as from inside Africa. First, the impetus has come from the so-called “international community” – a controversial expression now employed to give legitimacy to the combined action of Western powers, the IMF, the World Bank and other similar economic organisations aimed at imposing “their” democratic and above all economic models on Africa – to introduce democracy in Africa. This model of democratization would entail privatisation and liberalisation of monetary policies. In other words, democracy has been accompanied by a loss of economic sovereignty on the part of the African authorities in charge which accepted and implemented these reforms. The introduction of democracy has always been accompanied by economic exploitation – sometimes referred to as “free market” although the adjective “free” could easily be removed. It is a contradiction in terms, to the extent that in the model of democracy proffered by the West, the noun “freedom” and the adjective “free” have usurped the idea of justice and equality. These apparently contradictory aspects within the human political sphere – freedom and equality – should and could be present in a truly democratic system. With regard to the relationship between this kind of democratization – defined as “neo-liberal” – and the fading military presence in African politics envisaged by the “international community”, it is arguable that that neo-liberal democracy has fitted in quite well with post-military regimes because almost everywhere African military elites have either remained in power or have acquired advantageous positions in the economic sector. What is apparent is that in those instances where the military has retained its strong presence in the Government, despite the transition from military regime to civilian Government, neo-liberal democracy, which flies its freedom flag high, does not jeopardize the privileges of the reconstituted elite. The interests of that elite would only be threatened in the event that a popular or direct form of democracy were established (not mediated by political parties), of the type espoused by various great intellectuals, past and present, such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Walter Rodney, Mahmood Mamdani, Issa Shivji – but this topic goes beyond the remit of the current paper.

From inside Africa, the passage from military authoritarianism to indirect democracy has followed three routes: top-down reforms, processes of “democratization” from below, and internal war. In cases of top-down reforms, democracy and elections have been introduced by military governments themselves. Top-down reforms have occurred

when the governing rulers have responded to an impending or actual crisis by initiating democratic reforms. This has been the case of Nigeria. In this country, in 1998, the military dictator Sanny Abacha died and was succeeded by Major-General Abdulsalami Abubakar. This political succession was the event that led in 1999 to parliamentary and presidential elections resulting in turn in the swearing in of President Olusegun Obasanjo, himself a former military man. Some observers talked about the “banality of power in democratic Nigeria”, and rightly so. “The way in which power is wielded and performed in the current political dispensation in Nigeria bears out and complicates Foucault’s thesis of subtle and stealthy power at the same time; it is at once crudely physical and invisibly subtle [...] Elected officials have been building little armies of cohesion. And, most recently, they have resorted to the use of blackmail (employing state resources and state-funded programs) to force obedience and conformity. This recent addition to the behavioural repertoire of Nigerian political leaders has serious implications for how citizens engage with power. In fact it has implications for whether or not they engage with power at all”.²

Where top-down reforms have taken place and have not ignored the justice element of democracy, i.e. where they tried not to employ a strictly neo-liberal agenda but maintained a semi-autonomous profile vis-à-vis the “international community”, the results of the transition from military to democracy have been more positive. This is the case of Ghana. As noted by John Adedeji, “Rawlings saw part of his role as the head of state to be that of a ‘watch dog’ for the people; in that role, it was not unusual for him to speak his mind and intervene in issues whenever he saw what he considered to be an injustice, corruption or gross incompetence. The process of political change begun in 1982 by Rawlings [...] was a deliberate strategy to rebuild the political structures from ‘bottom up’ and at each stage, to ensure that the citizens were involved (usually in a referendum) to debate the issues and decide their future in the name of nation building [...] The vision resulted in the drafting of the Constitution, formation of many political parties, and holding of the 1992 elections, all based on good planning to guarantee the restoration of electoral and political systems in Ghana [...] Overall, Rawlings left a legacy where Ghanaians, as a people and society, have the enviable opportunity to enjoy the quality of life and also reap the benefits of a systemic development in an ever-changing global, political and economic environment”.³

² M.E. OCHONU, *Democracy and the Performance of Power: Observations from Nigeria* in University of Michigan Library, vol. 1, no. 1, 2004, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4761563.0001.105> (accessed 24/05/13).

³ J.L. ADEDEJI, *The Legacy of J.J. Rawlings in Ghanaian Politics*, in «African Studies Quarterly», vol. 5, no. 2, 2001, <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v5/v5i2a1.htm> (accessed 18/06/13).

Processes of “democratization” from below have occurred when there is mounting popular pressure from the people resulting in national conferences, popular revolutions, coups d’état, or social pact formations – all with the goal of moving toward a more democratic society. In general, transitions from below are said to be plagued with uncertainty. Some scholars argue that transitions from above are more promising in terms of their ability to “deliver” democracy, because they tend to be more specific about their time-frame, procedural steps, and overall strategy. Other writers contend that every historical case of regime-change has involved some negotiation between government and opposition groups — explicit or implicit. Transitions may also begin as one type and become another, particularly if the government is unsure of how far it wants to go in opening up the country to reform. In many cases, however, they combine elements of the two transition processes.

In the early 1990s, the so-called “national conferences”, particularly in Francophone countries, have emerged as vehicles for representation, accountability, and consensus formation. These conferences have been convened as a result of pressure from citizens and the elite classes for public dialogue about the democratization process. This has occurred in Benin, Niger, Mali, Gabon, Zaire, Congo-Brazzaville, and Zambia. In addition, opposition groups in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire have called for national conferences in their respective countries. In some cases, national conferences have unceremoniously reduced or eliminated the powers of incumbent rulers. In Benin, for example, where the first organisation of the *Conférence nationale des forces vives de la nation* was held in February 1997 in Cotonou, Mathieu Kérékou broke down and swept as an assembly of ruling-party members and other leaders pronounced his repressive regime corrupt, incompetent, and illegal and even rejected an interim leadership role for him. Kérékou will be beaten by a new-comer when democratic elections took place but, quite oddly, the former “dictator” won in the second elections a few years later in 2001. The national conference in Togo sought to facilitate the emergence of the formerly clandestine opposition, although President Gnassingbé Eyadéma called out troops and declared an end of the transition effort on the final day of the national conference.

Where there has not been a top-down or a bottom-up road to reform, neo-liberal democracy has come about through war. This was the case in Ethiopia (and by consequence in Eritrea), the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, etc. In these countries, military authoritarian regimes have themselves fallen as a result of military action. The new élite in power are fighters or former fighters, who have declared faith in the rule of law and called for free party elections. All of these democratic regimes have to date yet to prove their democratic credentials even in the presence of indirect forms of democracy and party elections.

The New Role of Armies in Democracies

The success of a democracy is sometimes referred to as the result of the geopolitical situation of a country. That smaller countries have generally done better than bigger ones, for example, reflects in part the challenge of governing over large areas. Africa's armed forces unsurprisingly continue to play a part in these historical as well as geopolitical differences.⁴

Considerations of the geopolitics at a wider level involve a review of a combination of factors: the end of the Cold War, initiatives of the African Union to put an end to constant military coups, together with other African initiatives, such as for example NEPAD.⁵ The simultaneous spread of technology, electoral standards and values have also helped to shape the military's contemporary orientation. Indeed, as was proposed by some scholars recently, at the Tswalu Dialogue,⁶ it has become possible to discern a taxonomy of African militaries in terms of their relationship with civilian government.

This brief overview shows how "democratic governance" took hold in Africa starting from the 1990s. Some observers continue to say that this is true especially if measured in terms of human rights and economic freedoms. This is reflected in improvements to African economic circumstances, with the continent enjoying the best growth decade on record since the 2000s. Of course Africa's development circumstances are highly differentiated, reflecting history, policy choices, resource endowments, geographical location and size. However, one may ask, how useful is this kind of regime classification vis-à-vis peoples who continue to be dispossessed, both politically and materially, from the supposedly positive transition process from military to civilian.

So what is the role of the military today in democratic Africa? This is a key political question. Africa's GDP is growing but many observers affirm that the sources of instability are still present in today's society. Africa's post-independence history shows that if people are neglected, the army could become a domestic risk for civil government. However, it is possible to argue that the real problem is not the army per se but the military or civilian rule in a context of generalised inequality and injustice. Social justice is not synonymous with civilian rule and history

⁴ M. OTTAWAY, J. HERBST and G. MILLS, *Africa's Big States: Toward a New Realism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Princeton University, 2004.

⁵ NEPAD is the acronym for New Partnership for African Development. In October 2001, the Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, South African President Thabo Mbeki, and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika launched NEPAD, which aims to foster development and open government and end wars in return for aid, foreign investment and the lifting of trade barriers to African exports.

⁶ The Tswalu Dialogue on Economic Dimension to Peace-Building was held in March 2012 in the Kalahari Desert: see video on <http://vimeo.com/42124843>.

has taught us that some African military governments have been more effective than their civilian counterparts in bringing justice as well as democracy in some societies.

But should the military contribute to a secure political environment for social development? According to the mainstream political thinking of today, the best contribution the military can ensure in this regard is to stay out of politics. This is why institutional and economic incentives have been provided to this end. However, a further taxonomy has been developed by those same forces that pushed for neo-liberal democratic reforms in Africa to justify military intervention when social unrest threatens free market forces and neo-liberal democracy. This new taxonomy of power categorises today's African military on the basis of their capabilities as "enablers", "providers" and "followers" of the neo-liberal democratic agenda. The assumption is that the African military is generally under-resourced to carry out those roles in the neo-liberal State. To this end, more financial resources have been granted to the military sector in different democratic African countries.⁷ The official justification for this expenditure is always to improve the skills and equipment of the national armies. Then the military is increasingly used to police African societies and less to engage in inter-State wars.⁸

A significant problem faced by new non-military governments in Africa today relates to the inadequacy of representative democracy to bring into the democratic system the dimension of social justice. To rely on "freedom" as the sole legitimising tool for democracy does not allow much space for social development. Social development could be achieved by giving for example free access to public education. The contrary is happening now, with the number of schools being reduced and the access to education being limited increasingly to those who can afford it.

The contemporary history of the passage from military rule to civilian rule in Africa is not a crucial issue, even for democracy. There exists a problem of definition of democracy. The concept is too vague and is open to a wide set of definitions. The real difference between a "good" and a "bad" government depends on the definition that is given to the term "democracy", and much less on the involvement or not of the military in the government. It is in fact possible to have civilian rulers who are not democratic and military rulers who are – in the limited sense that they try to increase the level of access to health care and education of their

DRC is a fragile state and a young democracy still in quest for peace and stabilization. The challenge of democratic consolidation cannot be considered in isolation from the long period of autocratic rule and wars in Congo itself and from the situation in the Great Lakes region, in particular in the eastern regions of DRC bordering Rwanda and Uganda

⁷ On the increasing expenditure for the military is sector see: S.P.-FREEMAN, J. COOPER, O. ISMAIL, *et al. Military Expenditure in SIPRI Yearbook 2011*, see: <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2011/files/SIPRIYB1104-04A-04B.pdf> (accessed 02/03/2013).

⁸ J.F. CLARK, *The Decline of the African Military Coup*, «Journal of Democracy», vol. 18, no. 3, 2007, pp. 141-155.

people and to foster a more equitable distribution of resources so that these peoples can make good use of their right to express their political views. The issue of the military and authoritarianism, in Africa as elsewhere, is in fact related to the political (il)literacy of the masses.