
The Military Coup in Gabon: Dynastic Succession and Wealth Concentration



Ibtissam Bedri

University of Batna 1. Algeria, Ibtissam.badri@univ-batna.dz

Research laboratory: LSRMPUDI

Received date: 05/05/2024

Accepted date: 29/05/2024

Publication date: 01/07/2024

Abstract:

Africa has witnessed a surge of military coups since gaining independence, with these coups becoming a prominent means of political regime change, particularly in Central and West Africa. Between 2020 and 2023, Africa experienced 8 successful coups, highlighting the need to investigate the multifaceted factors shaping the trajectory of military coups. The most recent coup in Gabon in 2023 aimed to end the decades-long rule of the Bongo family, characterized by dynastic succession policies. This resulted in political stagnation, wealth concentration, and the postponement of democratic transitions.

Keywords: *military coup; contagion effect; Gabon; Bongo family; power monopoly.*

* Corresponding author: Ibtissam Bedri, Ibtissam.badri@univ-batna.dz

Introduction:

Military coups are a recurring mode of political transition in Africa, meriting comprehensive scholarly attention due to their divergent causes and impacts across different temporal and geographical contexts. This analysis is particularly pertinent given the continent's abundance of natural resources juxtaposed with widespread political, economic, and security instability. Over 55% of its population subsists below the poverty threshold, a condition exacerbated by the autocratic tendencies of civilian rulers who often extend their tenures or engineer political dynasties. These dynamics collectively cultivate fertile grounds for coups, further propagated by the rapid contagion effect observed within the region.

This paper presents a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of military coups in Africa, with particular emphasis on Gabon. The nation experienced a failed coup in 2019 and, within five years, another attempt succeeded in 2023. This case provides fertile ground for examining the internal context that precipitated a coup against the Bongo family's 56-year rule in an environment marked by political turbulence and successive coups in Central and West Africa.

Research Question:

How does the domestic context and political behavior of the ruling authority influence the likelihood of a coup in Gabon?

To address this question, the paper is structured into the following thematic sections:

1. Conceptual Framework of Military Coups.
2. Phenomenon of Military Intervention.
3. Coups and Revolution.
4. Military Engagement in Political Governance.
5. Typologies of Military Intervention in Political Affairs.

1. Military Coups: Conceptual Framework

A military coup is a "sudden and violent seizure of power by a faction, usually from within the army, to overthrow legitimate authority according to a premeditated plan" (Al-Kilani, nd.P, 372).

Samuel Finer defines a coup as "the forcible replacement of civilian incumbents by elements of the armed forces." (Bishara,2017, P. 45)

Noniehal Singh underscores the importance of understanding coups (Bishara,2017, P. 45) as "the primary mechanism for regime change and irregular leadership displacement globally." (Abdel Halim,2005)

A military coup entails the coordinated movement of specific military units and leaders to assume governance and depose the incumbent ruler, whether civilian or military, with the aim of assuming control and governance by the military (Weyand,2015, P. 152). It constitutes an illicit and overt endeavor by the regular armed forces of a state to depose the executive authority (Duron& willianson, 2023).

The coup endeavor is orchestrated by the military institution and is marked by its suddenness, necessitating a high degree of secrecy, confidentiality, and discipline surrounding the desired objectives. The armed forces derive their legitimacy from being a branch of the state, and the decisions of their leaders are legitimized by their subordination to the state presidency, which appoints military leaders, and by its authority to remove them (Sulaiman, 2015, P. 31).

A. Coup and Militarism

Militarism entails military interference in political affairs, entrenching the military institution's dominance over the state and imposing its regime on civilian life. This tendency becomes pronounced when constitutional institutions and political entities fail to meet emerging challenges (Al-Kilani, nd.P, 108).

B. Coup vs. Revolution

A revolution typically involves mass participation in seeking social, economic, and political transformation. In contrast, a coup is a top-down change that results in the sudden replacement of the state's decision-makers and rarely modifies fundamental social and economic policies or redistributes power among political factions (Brittanica, 2023).

C. Types of Military Regimes

Finer identifies four types of military interference in politics (Shattab,2021, P.3021) based on the military's control over political decision-making and transparency:

- Military Supportive Regimes
- Intermittently Indirect Military Regimes
- Indirect Military Regimes
- Proper Military Regimes (Shattab,2021, P.3021).

2. Coup Domino Effect in Africa (2020-2023)

From 2020 to 2023, constitutional collapses occurred in West and Central Africa through a wave of coups, with seven successful ones in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon. The number of coups in this period equals the total in the preceding decade.

- a. **Mali Coups (2020-2021):** Mali experienced a military coup in 2020, ousting President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. The army forced his resignation and dissolved the government, establishing a transitional government in 2020. In May 2021, the army arrested the president in a second coup, installing Colonel Assimi Goïta as interim president.
- b. **Guinea Military Coup:** On September 5, 2021, the military overthrew President Alpha Condé. In October, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya took office as interim president (Hasan, 2023).
- c. **Burkina Faso Coups and Counter-Coup:** In January 2022, the military ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, installing Captain Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. However, in September, the military removed Damiba and appointed Captain Ibrahim Traoré as interim president until the 2024 presidential elections (Muhyi al-Din, 2023, Pp. 370-371)
- d. **Niger Coup:** On July 26, 2023, the military overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum. General Abdourahamane Tchiani assumed leadership of the country.
- e. **Gabon Coup:** After President Ali Bongo's election to a third term, army officers seized power, placing him under house arrest and choosing General Brice Oligui Nguema to lead the transitional government. The coup occurred 36 days after the successful coup in Niger.

Between 2020 and 2023, the African continent witnessed 18 coup attempts, of which seven were successful. Notably, four of these occurred in just two countries—Mali (August 2020-May 2021) and Burkina Faso (January 2022-September 2022). Additionally, failed coup attempts were recorded in Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, São Tomé, and Príncipe. The year 2021 marked a significant surge in coup activities, substantially exceeding the average frequency observed in prior years.

This period highlighted a pattern where several African nations appeared particularly susceptible to coups (Uppalo, 2021), largely due to a confluence of underlying factors: entrenched poverty, economic underperformance, and rampant corruption. These conditions not only precipitate the initial coups but also facilitate a contagion effect, heightening the risk of subsequent coups across the region when similar conditions prevail, and the military opts to intervene.

In response to the rising threat of such political upheavals, countries including Cameroon, Senegal, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone have proactively undertaken measures to fortify their military structures. These measures include strategic appointments and structural changes within their armed forces, aimed at preempting potential coups.

3. The Bongo Family's Power Monopoly and Political Exclusion

Gabon gained independence from France in 1960, with President Léon M'ba governing until his death in 1967. This period saw a failed coup against M'ba in 1964 after he dissolved parliament and established a one-party system. French forces intervened to thwart the coup, consolidating M'ba's rule. During the same era, the Bongo family's grip on power commenced with Omar Bongo's appointment as Vice President shortly after Gabon's independence. Upon the death of the first president, Bongo immediately ascended to the presidency, establishing the Gabonese Democratic Party as the sole political entity, thereby centralizing political power. This move included the abolition of the Vice Presidency in favor of a Prime Ministerial role that was structurally barred from succession to the presidency—a stark infringement on democratic norms.

Omar Bongo's regime was characterized by entrenched ties with France, which significantly buttressed his position against potential military coups. His dominance extended to controlling the nation's lucrative oil revenues, yet this wealth did not correlate with an enhancement in the populace's living standards.

In 1990, Bongo faced extensive public dissent manifested in demonstrations and protests against the prevailing governance conditions. His response comprised only superficial concessions and reforms, with no genuine intention of relinquishing power after more than two decades in office. Despite the societal unrest, Bongo secured the presidency in successive elections in 1993, 1998, and 2005, maintaining his rule until his death in October 2009. In a pivotal move in 2003, he engineered a constitutional amendment that eliminated presidential term limits, thereby granting himself extensive powers that included dissolving the National Assembly, declaring emergencies, and controlling legislative processes. These constitutional liberties allowed his party to secure 84 of 120 parliamentary seats in subsequent elections, further entrenching his authoritarian governance.

A. Ali Bongo's Ascension and Governance: A Continuation of Dynastic Power in Gabon

Following the demise of President Omar Bongo in 2009, his son, Ali Bongo Ondimba, ascended to the presidency amid contentious circumstances. Garnering 42% of the votes, his election sparked considerable opposition claims of autocratic drift and a monopolization of power. Despite this domestic turbulence, Ali Bongo's inauguration was widely recognized on the international stage, highlighting the

complex interplay between internal dissent and external validation in Gabonese politics.

Ali Bongo's political career was meticulously crafted from an early stage. Elected to the central committee of the ruling Gabonese Democratic Party in 1983, he advanced to its political bureau by 1986. His tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1989 to 1991, and subsequently as a deputy in the parliament from 1991 to 1999, underscored his rising influence. In 1999, he assumed the crucial role of Minister of Defense, holding this position for a decade until his presidential election. During this period, Ali strategically maneuvered to marginalize the military's direct involvement in political processes, a tactic aimed at cementing his path to power (Husain, 2023).

His re-election in 2016, where he secured 49.80% of the vote, was again marred by allegations of corruption from opposition and watchdog groups, which the Bongo family strongly refuted.

B. Failed Coup Attempt Against Ali Bongo and His Resolute Hold on Power

In 2019, exploiting Ali Bongo's absence from Gabon due to medical treatment abroad following a stroke in 2018, military dissidents declared the establishment of a National Reform Council aimed at reinstating democracy. However, the security forces swiftly restored order. This failed coup was accompanied by substantial international backing for Bongo's leadership, particularly from France, which vocally condemned the coup and reiterated its opposition to any unconstitutional changes in governance. Similarly, the African Union emphasized its stance against non-constitutional alterations of power.

C. Military Coup and Ouster of Ali Bongo (2009-2023)

Despite apparent signs of instability during his second term, especially after his illness and the unsuccessful coup attempt in 2019, Bongo did not rectify the underlying governance issues. Persisting in his role, the 60-year-old leader sought reelection in the 2023 presidential race despite health concerns and doubts about his capacity to govern (Hani, 2023).

In 2023, a successful military coup dethroned the Gabonese President, annulled the election results granting him a third term, and dismantled the established republican structures, sealing the nation's borders. The coup leaders affirmed their commitment to maintaining Gabon's international obligations.

These developments demonstrate Ali Bongo's efforts to perpetuate the Bongo family's dominance over Gabon's political and economic spheres. The recurrent failures to disrupt the Bongo dynasty through electoral or peaceful means culminated in a military coup, which received considerable support from the populace, decisively altering the nation's political landscape (Al-Jazzar, 2023).

4. Dynamics Driving the Military Coup Against the Bongo Family in Gabon, 1967-2023

A. Inheritance of Power:

France's enduring patronage of the Bongo family in Gabon as a key ally shaped the Gabonese societal perception that France would endorse Ali Bongo's intent to designate his son, Nouredin Bongo, as his successor. This dynastic ambition faced considerable opposition from the populace, who demanded systemic changes and equitable distribution of the nation's resources, long dominated by the Bongo family (Osman, 2023). The successful continuation of Bongo in presidential elections was perceived as an affirmation of the inheritance plan, particularly as the military coup, led by General Brice Oligui Nguema, Head of the Republican Guard, unfolded within the context of familial strife among the ruling family. Notably, the new military leader's maternal ties to the Bongo family, along with support from Pascaline Bongo and some of her siblings against the faction led by Ali Bongo's French wife, Sylvia Bongo, and their son Nouredin, underscored deep-seated divisions (Hassan, 2023).

B. Economic Deterioration:

Despite its wealth in natural resources, Gabon's economic indicators reveal significant disparities. The nation's real GDP grew from 1.5% in 2021 to 3% in 2022, positioning it as the seventh-largest oil producer in Africa with an output of approximately 181,000 barrels per day. However, the fiscal health of the country showed a surplus of just 0.8% in 2022, with debt levels reducing from 66% in 2021 to 52.6% in 2022 (Ahmed, 2023). Despite these figures, over 33% of Gabonese live in poverty, and unemployment reached 28.8% in 2022. Gabon ranks 110th out of 189 countries in the UN Human Development Index, a rating that belies its economic capabilities.

The country's mineral wealth, including uranium and magnesium, and its strategic position have not ameliorated the living standards of its populace. In 2018, the government adopted austerity measures aligned with the IMF's economic revival plans, further strained by the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards. Public discontent grew regarding the Bongo family's monopolization of the oil wealth, leading to accusations of corruption, mismanagement, and treating the country's assets as their private property (Abdel Zahra, 2023).

C. Presidential Election Rigging:

Gabon's 2023 presidential election featured 14 candidates. The incumbent, Ali Bongo, secured 64.24% of the vote, as declared by the national electoral commission, defeating his main challenger, Albert Ondo Ossa, who garnered 30.77% (Abdel Zahra, 2023, P. 5). The aftermath saw the opposition challenge the legitimacy of the results, citing electoral fraud, particularly noting the

absence of adequate international and regional election observers, internet blackouts, and suspensions of media coverage during the voting process.

The ensuing political turmoil culminated in a military coup, propelled by allegations of systematic rigging by the presidential coalition, marking a decisive turn in Gabon's political saga and reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the enduring rule of the Bongo family.

Conclusion

The 2023 military coup in Gabon unfolded under conditions markedly different from previous coups, distinguished by acute internal strife within the family of the deposed President Ali Bongo. Concurrently, the coup was characterized by a waning of French and international support, despite significant economic and strategic interests in the region.

Gabon's political future hinges on two principal trajectories:

Firstly, the success of the ongoing transitional phase is contingent upon the organization of comprehensive internal political dialogue, leading to the adoption of a consensual constitution and the conduct of free and transparent elections, as committed by the new military leadership. This path necessitates the neutrality of the military authorities and sufficient support from both domestic and international actors to facilitate the transitional process, ensuring it does not extend unduly. While these conditions are feasible, their full realization remains uncertain.

Secondly, the potential entrenchment of the political crisis, driven by the enduring influence of the Bongo family and their extensive social base, could precipitate another military coup or facilitate the family's return to power. An extended transitional period could be detrimental, impeding the reconstruction of political stability in the nation.

Bibliography:

- Abdel Halim, A. (2005). *Al-hukm fi Afriqiya min al-inqilabat ila al-tadawul al-silmi 'ala al-sulta* [Governance in Africa from Coups to Peaceful Transition of Power]. *Majallat Al-Dimuqratiya*, Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. Retrieved from <https://digital.ahram.org.eg>
- Abdul-Zahra, A. S. (2023). *Nihayat hukm 'a'ilat Bongo fi al-Gabon* [The End of the Bongo Family Rule in Gabon]. Iraq: Hamu Rali Center for Research and Strategic Studies.

- Abdel Zahra, A. S. (2023). Nihayat hukm 'a'ilat Bongo fi al-Gabon [The end of the Bongo family rule in Gabon]. Baghdad: Hamu Rali Center for Research and Strategic Studies, p. 3.
- Ahmed, M. A. K. (2023). Al-Gabon takmell 'hizam al-inqilabat': Faransa takhsar akhir qila'aha al-Afriqiyya [Gabon completes "the belt of coups": France loses its last African stronghold]. Al-Akhbar, (4998).
- Al-Jazzar, M. (2023). Al-inqilab al-'askari fi al-Gabon: Al-asbab wa al-tadaiyat [The Military Coup in Gabon: Causes and Implications]. Qira'at Ifriqiyya. Retrieved from <http://qiraatafican.com/12800>
- Al-Kilani, A. W. (n.d.). Mawsu'at al-Siyasa [Encyclopedia of Politics]. Beirut: Arabic Encyclopedia for Studies and Publishing.
- Bishara, A. (2017). Al-Jaysh wa al-siyasa: Ishkaliyat nazariya wa namadhej Arabiya [The Army and Politics: Theoretical Problems and Arab Models]. Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.
- Duron, M., & Williamson, B. (2023). "By the numbers: Coups in Africa." VOA News. Retrieved from <https://projects.voranews.com/african-coup/>
- "Coup d'état." (2023). Britannica. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/coup-d'etat>
- Hani, R. (2023, August 31). Nihayat salalat Bongo: Rajul al-isti'mar al-jadid yatanahha [The End of the Bongo Dynasty: The New Colonial Man Steps Down]. Al-Akhbar, (4998).
- Hasan, H. A. R. (1996). Al-'askariyyun wa al-hukm fi Afriqiya: Dirasa fi tabi'at al-'alaqat al-madaniyya al-'askariyya [The Military and Governance in Africa: A Study in the Nature of Civil-Military Relations]. Cairo: African Future Studies Center.
- Hasan, H. A. R. (2023). Fakh al-inqilabat... Mustaqbal al-dawr al-siyasi li al-juwush fi Afriqiya [The Coup Trap... The Future of the Political Role of Armies in Africa]. Majallat Qira'at Ifriqiyya. Retrieved from <https://Qiratafican.com/12936>
- Husain, M. A. (2023). Al-inqilab al-'askari yautihu b'a'ilat Bongo allati hakamat al-Gabon 55 'aman [The Military Coup Ousts the Bongo Family That Ruled Gabon for 55 Years]. Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. Retrieved from <http://awsat.com/>
- Hussein, H. A. R. (1996). Al-'askariyyun wa al-hukm fi Afriqiya: Dirasa fi tabi'at al-'alaqat al-madaniyya al-'askariyya [The Military and Governance in Africa: A Study in the Nature of Civil-Military Relations]. Cairo: African Future Studies Center.

- Muhyi al-Din, S. (2023). Tajdid al-inqilabat al-'askariyya fi Afriqiya: Burkina Faso namudhajan [Renewal of Military Coups in Africa: The Case of Burkina Faso]. *Majallat Dirasat Ifriqiya*, 45(2).
- Osman, M. A. (2023). Inqilab al-Gabon: Ma al-tadaiyat wa al-sinariyuhah al-mumkinah? [The Gabon Coup: What are the Implications and Possible Scenarios?] *Qira'at Ifriqiyya*. Retrieved from <http://qiraateprican.com/13305>
- Shattab, K. (2021). Al-ethnicity wa al-inqilabat al-'askariyya fi Afriqiya janub al-Sahra [Ethnicity and Military Coups in Sub-Saharan Africa]. *Majallat Al-Ustadh Al-Bahith Li Al-Dirasat Al-Qanuniyya Wa Al-Siyasiyya*, 6(2).
- Sulaiman, H. (2015). Al-'alaqat al-madaniyya al-'askariyya wa al-tahawwul al-dimuqrati [Civil-Military Relations and Democratic Transition]. Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.
- Uppalo, D. (2021). Guinea: Post-coup assessment of social, political, and economic risks. The Counter Terrorism Group. Retrieved from <http://nbdy/aixecz> (Note: This URL seems incorrect or incomplete)
- Weynand, P. (2015). Al-dimuqratiya wa dawlat al-hizb al-wahid: Al-khibra al-Afriqiya li hukm al-siyasa fi Afriqiya [Democracy and the One-Party State: The African Experience of Political Governance in Africa]. Cairo: Supreme Council for Culture.