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Africa's Militaries: A Missing Link in Democratic Transitions

By Mathurin C. Houngnikpo

- **Military acceptance of civilian authority remains a missing piece of Africa's democratic transition puzzle.**
- **While often perceived as an unwanted restriction on the purview of the security sector, the doctrine of democratic civilian control of the military boosts the legitimacy, capabilities, and performance of the armed forces.**
- **The practical realization of this doctrine requires Africa's parliaments to assert and exercise more robust control and oversight of the security sector.**

HIGHLIGHTS

War is too important to be left to the generals.
—Georges Clemenceau, former prime minister of France

It is a difficult period for everybody, but we believe that it is a political thing. We are not politicians. We are military professionals and we are determined to remain so. Nobody, no matter what, no matter the effort, will drag us into it.
—Nigerian Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Abdulrahman Dambazzau in May 2010 shortly after the office and authorities of the Nigerian presidency were transferred to Vice President Goodluck Jonathan by the National Assembly following the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua

A spate of military coups from 2008 to 2010 in Mauritania, Guinea, Niger, and Madagascar raised the specter of a return to military rule in Africa. While the subsequent resumption of civilian government in Guinea and Niger has reduced these concerns, evidence of military influence in politics remains widespread across the continent. This is prominently in view in Egypt where, in the midst of political transition, the military is attempting to maintain a privileged role for itself despite the widespread demands for genuine democratic reform.

In Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Guinea Bissau, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, Chad, Sudan, Angola, Rwanda, and many other African states, democratization or the consolidation of political reforms has been severely inhibited by armed forces that regularly intervene in political and economic matters. In Uganda, for instance, the military is permitted to select 10 officers to serve as members of parliament. In some cases, the armed forces operate autonomously and even maintain commercial interests outside the military budget. In Rwanda, the military grows, buys, processes, and exports commercial crops through a military-owned company.[1] Military officers in Angola participate in contract negotiations with foreign companies, sit on corporate boards, and are majority shareholders in telecommunications firms.[2]

Such practices are not only counterproductive to democratic governance, but also undermine stability, economic development, and even the interests of the militaries themselves. In cases where militaries have assumed total control over government, the results have usually been disastrous. Annual economic growth rates in Nigeria and Mali, for example, have been on average a full 3 percentage points lower during periods of military versus civilian rule. While lauded for their discipline and quick decisionmaking, militaries have little background in job creation, macroeconomic policy, public health, or the many other complex challenges of governing. More generally, military decisionmaking is rigidly hierarchical and beyond appeal, whereas in the public domain, policy implementation tends to be more effective when built through a consultative, transparent, and deliberative process.

Beyond the blunt military putsch, increasingly prevalent and sinister developments in Africa are the emergence of "democratic" and "creeping" coups. In the former, a military coup is staged, followed by a tactical withdrawal to hold elections that are "won" by a recently retired military officer—to the accolades of both regional and international organizations. Such was the case following the 2008 coup in Mauritania by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. In creeping coups, civilian leaders will slowly erode the powers and authorities of legislatures, judiciaries, civil society groups, and other potential sources of opposition. This was the pattern followed by the now deposed President Mamadou Tandja in Niger and is, arguably, the process under way currently in Djibouti and Malawi, among other places. Co-opting security leaders or counterbalancing the military with special presidential security units is key to the success of such extra-constitutional exercises of authority.

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The level of such co-optation is extensive in some countries. The use of force against peaceful demonstrations in recent years by security units in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Uganda, Malawi, and Cameroon, among others, is case in point. The shooting of unarmed civilians clearly indicates that some security sector leaders in Africa continue to see their role as defending the regime in power rather than the constitution—contravening even basic codes of military conduct and emerging democratic norms on the continent. Upcoming elections in Zimbabwe, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Kenya may pose similar dilemmas for these countries' military and police leadership.

Even where legitimate civilian rule predominates, civil-military relations remain strained in much of Africa. Given its unique institutional dynamics, responsibilities, and standard procedures, the military can find it challenging to interact with parliament, civil society organizations, or other civilian entities. Likewise, most African civilian officials lack a deep understanding of security issues and institutions. Productive engagement, cooperation, and mutual respect are elusive and frustration is common.

In Nigeria, for example, the President of the Senate explained in a 2008 speech to fellow

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legislators that one of the country's greatest national security threats was a lack of familiarity between civilian and military agencies that demanded a "consistent and coherent process of engagement with a view to strengthening the security agencies' work vis-à-vis the legislature, particularly in the areas of appropriation, constitutional reforms, oversight functions, foreign policy, and national security."[3] Put simply, Africa's civilian and military leaders barely know one another.

Despite noteworthy progress toward democracy since the end of the Cold War, the influence of the security services in Africa continues to overshadow democratic development on the continent. Complications resulting from military overreach are not only limited to Africa's fragile or autocratic countries but also continue to be a challenge in the continent's better governed states. Military acceptance of civilian authority—the doctrine of civilian control—remains a missing piece of Africa's democratic transition puzzle. For democracy to sink deep roots on the continent, the security sector needs to be a willing partner in the process of democratic consolidation.

INCULCATING A DOCTRINE OF CIVILIAN, DEMOCRATIC AUTHORITY

The legitimacy of the security sector is ultimately derived from the authority vested in it by democratically elected civilian leaders under the rule of law. This, in turn, helps ensure that the use of force, the most authoritative demonstration of national power, is seen as justified and therefore supported by the general population. Recognizing the power of this legitimacy is the basis of the doctrine of civilian control of the military.

However, this doctrine is typically poorly understood or respected in Africa.[4] This is a consequence of many complex factors, including colonial legacies, weak oversight, and corruption. Colonial administrations typically structured and mandated African security forces to protect executive offices and strategic resources as well as to control and suppress Africans perceived as threats to the status quo. Remnants of these structures and outlooks still linger in Africa. Persistent weak governance has also meant that checks and balances to constrain public sector agencies to their official remit are easily breeched. Since they tend to be comparatively well funded and are often one of the biggest sectors of government in Africa, the armed forces often overstep their bounds with little opposition.

To be clear, it is not always leaders of the armed forces who attempt to seize power. Many civilian authoritarians have intentionally used the security services to weaken political opposition and protect their authority and patronage networks.

Strengthening the doctrine of civilian control of the military, then, requires institutional adjustments on the part of both military and civilian authorities. Such adjustments commence by aligning the distinct but complementary core strengths of civilian authorities and the armed forces. By constructively applying force or the threat of force, disciplined security forces are able to influence, manage, or control events, the principal purpose being to protect national security. Yet such actions only have credibility to the extent that they are seen as supporting a democratic leadership.

By contrast, a civilian government derives its powers directly from the governed. This generates a political authority that can more effectively manage and sustain security, as well as economic and social development. Legitimate governments are

"the armed forces and their actions are deemed legitimate *indirectly* through their deference to legitimate civilian authorities and civilian governing structures"

inherently more stable because they have relatively greater societal support to address internal problems, adapt to change, and navigate conflict that affects individual and collective well-being.[5] Likewise, coercion can be applied more credibly when decisions to use force are made by democratically elected civilians. Thus, the armed forces and their actions are deemed legitimate *indirectly* through their deference to legitimate civilian authorities and civilian governing structures.

In a similar manner, the doctrine of civilian control recognizes that the military, as a specialized

government agency with defined roles and responsibilities, is supposed to *implement* rather than *formulate* security policy. The military is but one instrument with which to enhance security. Diplomacy, socioeconomic policies, and various mediation tools all affect the drivers of tensions and disputes. Moreover, broad strategic matters, such as the decision to declare war, end conflict, and procure advanced armaments, have significant impacts on all citizens. Legitimate civilian leaders and institutions are in a better position to balance the application of these various instruments and considerations than counterparts in the armed forces.

BENEFITS OF CIVILIAN RULE AND DANGERS OF POLITICIZATION

This distinction between policymaking and policy implementation yields practical benefits for the security services. Excessive interference free from checks and balances has tended to erode capacity and professionalism in the security sector as well as the caliber of its leadership. For instance, lack of legitimacy often compels authoritarians to rely on ethnically or geographically biased recruitment to maintain allegiance. This tends to weaken readiness and effectiveness. The security forces are also more likely to be used as an employer of last resort, resulting in large but poorly educated and ill-trained military services. In Guinea Bissau, for example, the ratio of troops to total population is more than twice the average in West Africa. Meanwhile, its swollen ranks are undisciplined, its equipment dated and unusable, and interservice strife acute.

Côte d'Ivoire's security sector experienced a similar dilution of professionalism over the last decade. Personnel tripled in size as former President Laurent Gbagbo continually doled out state resources to purchase the support of key constituencies. The gradual growth and politicization of the security services was a major contributor to instability in the country, which culminated in a deadly standoff following Gbagbo's loss in the November 2010 presidential elections. The national defense forces disregarded their obligations to uphold the constitution and instead sided with Gbagbo in his effort to overturn the electoral results. Thousands died before Gbagbo was captured. Having discredited themselves and their uniform, military leaders were no longer able to command the respect of the population or fulfill their role in society. The country's new military leaders now face the daunting task of reforming and realigning security services that were once a highly respected force in Africa. Such setbacks can be avoided if African militaries adapt to and uphold expanding democratic reforms on the continent.

Military and authoritarian governments will also attempt to buy the loyalty of one component of the armed forces at the expense of others to secure the regime's continued rule. Such considerations may lead to swings in budgetary support, favoring a specific branch of the armed forces at the expense of another, only to swing back in the other direction some time later.

The presidential guard in Togo, for example, is favored over other branches of the military and staffed predominantly by the ruling party's ethnic kin, skewing promotions and training that limit the military's capabilities. The resentment generated has contributed to multiple instances of mutiny in the armed forces since the early 1990s. Meanwhile, the military remains deficient in its rapid reaction capability, the small navy and air force have been sidelined, and general doctrine, strategy, and defense structures are unclear.[6]

A study of the budgeting process in Ethiopia determined that the centralization of spending decisions has led to higher levels of interservice rivalry and suboptimal resource allocation.[7] In Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa, evidence suggests that procurements of faulty or overpriced military equipment may have concealed diversions of funds to political campaigns.[8]

Frequent shifts, promotions, and demotions in Rwanda's security leadership have bred uncertainty and instability in the officer corps. For instance, President Paul Kagame suddenly announced the removal of the head of national intelligence in July 2011. His replacement was an army general who had been under house arrest for most of 2010. Such manipulation undercuts military professionalism. The lack of continuity also severely constrains the security services'

ability to modernize, make strategic arms procurements, and plan for the future.

Civilian authority, then, should also be subject to checks and balances, with the legislative branch having a critical role in approving military budgets and security policies. Without such accountability, decisions are more liable to be based on political, institutional, or personal interest as opposed to the real needs of the security services to protect the nation.

Studies of military expenditures and corruption have found that improvements in oversight should increase resources available to the military.[9] Additionally, effective oversight creates opportunities for citizens and civil society to have a voice in security policy and provision. Trusted, legitimate security services, in turn, are able to more easily cooperate, inform, and interact with civilians.

In short, tangible benefits accrue under the doctrine of civilian control. When decisions are made and resources allocated through a process of accountable and democratic governance, the outcomes are more likely to serve the national interest.

BALANCE THROUGH PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT

Many African parliaments have recently become more open and responsive to their electorates and increasingly active in developing and approving legislation. However, most have yet to fully incorporate oversight as a core activity.

Even where parliamentarians have demonstrated legislative aptitude and capacity, oversight has not been prioritized. In Ghana, for example, roughly 70 percent of Ghanaian members of parliament rate as poor the body's performance on oversight. Among parliamentary committees, defense and security portfolios are not very active. In Benin, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, members of parliament rarely focus primarily on matters of national security.[10] Not a single bill was proposed in Ghana's Defense and Interior Parliamentary Committee from 2007 through 2009.[11]

Auditing of the executive, the military budget, and the security sector more generally is also weak. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Angola, Senegal, Niger, Chad, Malawi, and several other African countries all rank near the bottom of indices of defense budget transparency in part due to infrequent, incomplete, or nonexistent audits.[12] When released, many audits contain no information on military procurements, which are deemed confidential.[13] However, studies have shown that actual expenditures exceed defense budgets by approximately 20 percent annually in Mali, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria.[14] Even when parliament actively reviews and approves military budgets, audits of subsequent spending, delivery of procurements, and performance are still essential.

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Public Accounts Committees (PACs) are another particularly important oversight institution. Typically chaired by an opposition member of parliament to ensure integrity, PACs are a common venue in parliamentary systems for reviewing audits, assessing government expenditures, holding hearings on policy implementation, and identifying corrective measures as necessary.[15]

In Ghana, the PAC has actively exercised its investigative powers, holding many public meetings—some are even televised—and has uncovered misappropriation and fraud.[16] The Public Accounts Committee of Uganda's Parliament has also been a vital backstop to the Defence and Internal Affairs Committee. Though their effectiveness remains impeded by excessive classification of documents and manipulation by the executive branch, misappropriation of funds has been exposed and officials have been penalized and imprisoned following reports from Uganda's Auditor General and hearings by the PAC.[17]

As the ears and eyes of citizens, parliamentarians must ensure that principles of good governance and the rule of law apply to the defense and security forces. Active parliamentary involvement makes the difference between civilian oversight and democratic oversight. A state without parliamentary oversight of

its security sector should at best be deemed an unfinished democracy.

THE WAY FORWARD

Democratic civilian control of the security sector in Africa has been uneven during the past 20 years of democratization experience. Still, Africa's institutions of accountability have been gaining traction.[18] To make further progress, Africa will need to build on this momentum.

As a starting point, parliamentary committees should more thoroughly scrutinize security sector leadership appointments put forth by the executive branch. In those countries where parliament remains excluded from such approval processes, institutionalizing it should be a priority. Without checks and balances, appointments are vulnerable to politicization.

Among those parliaments that are legally empowered to oversee such appointments, many lack fully capable and available legislative staff that normally perform such analysis. Addressing this is a priority. Civil society actors and independent media should also be encouraged to conduct and openly share evidence-based assessments of the integrity and merits of candidates.

Strengthening scrutiny of appointments achieves multiple goals. Most importantly, it improves security by identifying the most qualified appointees. It also sends a signal to all in the military that capable professionals will be rewarded. Security sector leaders who are appointed through a more accountable process will likewise have more credibility and will reduce the armed forces' vulnerability to manipulation by political actors. Parliamentary review of senior military appointments can also help balance the prevailing dominance of the executive branch over national security.

Parliamentarians should also move to curtail the excessive use of opaque budgeting to fund the security sector and clarify the standards of information classification, which are often abused to shield security sector activity from scrutiny. National security is a priority for any state and merits adequate support. Legislators should not be reticent in justifying these outlays. At the same time, many African states need to recalibrate their force structures to meet contemporary security challenges. This includes scrutiny of the role and cost of presidential guards.

To do so, parliamentarians must cultivate their expertise in security sector issues. Civilian leaders that are versed in the nuances and complexities of military strategy, policing, intelligence, threat assessment, and similar facets of national security will gain the trust and respect of military leaders, as well as more ably judge the qualities of policy options. A growing number of African research institutes and civil society organizations specialize in security issues. Africa's parliaments should engage more with such organizations and sponsor members' participation in their programs and exchanges.

"international partners must broaden their engagement beyond narrow 'train and equip' paradigms of devising security assistance to meet operational needs and focus more on overall governance and accountability"

Legislative agendas must also devote more attention to national security matters. Members of defense and security committees should hold more public hearings with security experts and officials on emerging threats, civil-military relations, deployments and operations, and the nation's long-term goals for military modernization, among many other topics. Promising initiatives and reforms emerging from these hearings should then inform new bills to be considered by these committees. Ombudsmen, PACs, and special commissions have proven to be critical elements of parliamentary oversight and therefore should be provided stronger mandates and funding.

Africa's Regional Economic Communities can also play vital roles in improving democratic oversight of the armed forces. Various security-oriented bodies—such as the Economic Community of West African States Committee of Chiefs of Defence, Staff Council of Elders, the Defense and Security Commission, and similar entities at other Regional Economic Communities—offer valuable venues to identify practical ways to institutionalize democratic

practices in the security sector. For instance, to better manage former military officers' roles in politics, these committees and councils could devise guidelines for enhanced asset disclosures of military leaders and moratoriums on running for office once they have retired from active duty.

These and other criteria could even provide the basis for a security sector peer review along the lines of the African Peer Review Mechanism, a now 10-year old initiative that publicizes multiple in-depth assessments of a range of governance indicators in African states.

More generally, African states also need to ratify the AU Charter on Democracy. Once ratified by 15 members—10 have done so thus far—this will strengthen the legal framework to prevent unconstitutional actions and creeping coups on the continent.

International partners must broaden their engagement beyond narrow "train and equip" paradigms of devising security assistance to meet operational needs and focus more on overall governance and accountability. Specifically, security partnerships should favor those countries that are more democratic and therefore more likely to contribute to regional stability. Directing security assistance to countries with more effective oversight mechanisms will, likewise, better ensure that funds and transfers are used responsibly.

In the end, consolidating democracy requires positive and productive civil-military relations. Contrary to most assumptions, such changes can be achieved to the mutual benefit of civilian and military communities. Democratic oversight of the security services is difficult to realize, but the benefits to regional, national, and human security that accrue from it are substantial and long lasting.

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