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STRENGTHENING MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM IN AFRICA

By Émile Ouédraogo

Military professionalism is a standard of conduct upheld by members of the armed forces committed to the values of service to the public, subordination to democratic civilian authority, allegiance to the constitution, political neutrality, and respect for the rule of law and human rights. Professional soldiers exhibit values of integrity, honor, duty, expertise, sacrifice, and respect for citizens and the institutions of the military. Military professionals are called to a higher ethical standard given the enormous trust and responsibility bestowed on them by citizens to use lethal force in defense of the country and population.



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WHY MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM IS IMPORTANT FOR AFRICA

There is a wide variance in the levels of military professionalism observed in Africa. In countries where it is lacking, the costs are high—persistent instability, vulnerability to malign external actors, chronic poverty, deferred investment, and stunted democratization.

Weak military professionalism in Africa is vividly evident in news accounts of instability from the continent—military coups, militaries collapsing in the face of attacks by irregular forces, corruption, looting, and human rights abuses, among others.

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The values of military professionalism resonate deeply with many African military officers. This is visible in certain African countries where apolitical security institutions have taken root and the military is a respected institution, welcomed as a defender of the people. African citizens across the continent aspire that these characterizations of civil military relations become the norm. Breaking the vicious cycle of instability, poverty, and misgovernance depends on it.

PRINCIPLES OF MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM



Democratic Sovereign Authority

A democratic political culture is the strongest foundation of professional militaries. It is grounded on national leaders who are chosen in an inclusive and participatory process, with citizens holding ultimate sovereign authority. This endows elected leaders with legitimacy—the recognition by citizens that those in power have attained their position through valid and commonly accepted means. This authority provides leaders an unparalleled mandate to set the direction and take decisions advancing citizen and national security.

Security actors operating under democratic civilian leadership are, in turn, uniquely empowered to implement a citizen-based security strategy—and gain the trust and support of the public in the process. Members of the armed forces under a democracy are expected to defend democratic institutions, uphold the rule of law, and respect human rights.

Nearly all African states have adopted democratic values and principles of military professionalism in their constitutions and military doctrines, which are, furthermore, rooted in numerous African cultures. These principles are also embraced in regional policy frameworks and by the African Union.



Allegiance to the State, Respect for Civil Society, and Disavowals of Coups

Independent and, at times, critical views expressed by government, opposition parties, and civil society are a hallmark of democratic political discourse. This debate and ensuing course corrections provide democracies the versatility to adjust to continually evolving circumstances. Politicized militaries, in contrast, are prone to preempting this process of democratic adaptation.

Countries that have experienced a coup pay a steep and longstanding price. Militaries have an abysmal governance track record reflected in poorer socioeconomic development, corruption, and instability. Moreover, one coup leads to another. Military governments also tend to dominate a country's key economic sectors. This further distorts the incentives for public service and security required of an effective military. Plato noted some 2,400 years ago that the meddling of soldiers into other professions will “bring the city to ruin.”



Ethical Institutional Culture

A soldier's ethos is an essential pillar of the institutional culture of the military and to the success of its mission. Soldiers need to defend society's interests above their own. Soldiers must have a calling to their profession. Bravery, dedication, sacrifice, and sense of duty to protect and serve fellow citizens should motivate soldiers as much as any paycheck. These values do not come naturally. They must be taught. Soldiers must be educated in a culture of ethics, just as they learn discipline, law, and combat—all within the bigger picture of the military's role in a democratic society.

BENEFITS OF A PROFESSIONAL MILITARY

- ▶ More effective national and citizen security provision
- ▶ Politically neutral military officers
- ▶ National and republican armed forces
- ▶ Clearly defined vision, mission, and role for each security organization
- ▶ Greater responsiveness to national security priorities
- ▶ More efficiency in the alignment and use of resources as well as greater legislative and public support to fund the military
- ▶ Security forces that uphold the law, respect human rights, and are accountable to a military code of conduct and civilian oversight
- ▶ Enhanced public trust, respect, and support for security forces

– Adapted from DCAF, *“The Armed Forces: Roles and Responsibilities in Good Security Sector Governance”*



OBSTACLES TO MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM

The Legacy of Colonialism

Colonial armies' reliance on minority-based forces and limited investment in African officer corps created conditions conducive for coups and weak military professionalism in the early post-colonial period.

Ethnic and Tribal Biases

Recruiting predominantly from the ethnicity of the president creates a chain of command more loyal to the president than to the constitution. Ethnically biased armed forces lack the popular trust, legitimacy, and competency of a merit-based force, hindering their effectiveness.

Politicization of the Military and the Militarization of Politics

Manipulation of military allegiances results in a military that is more partisan and less professional in the eyes of society, undercutting the recruitment of committed, disciplined, and talented soldiers. This paves the way for future instability.

Weak Operational Capacity

Inadequate institutional capacity inhibits many African militaries from fulfilling their mission and fosters hollow shells of defense structures that quickly fall apart when tested.

- **Gaps in the chain of command fostering cultures of impunity.** A functional chain of command is a prerequisite for any strong military, reflecting good leadership, discipline, and accountability. When illegal actions by soldiers go unpunished, it perpetuates favoritism and a view that military personnel are above the law.
- **Insufficient oversight of procurement practices.** Many African armies complain of inadequate training, supplies, and housing, despite military budgets often being larger than most other public services. Weak internal and external oversight of security sector procurement facilitates the misallocation of funds.
- **Weak resource management.** A bloated officer corps relative to the number of troops under command is a source of indiscipline and poor morale. Disrepair of military assets and inadequate maintenance have also contributed to the paralysis of some African armed forces. Human Resources offices and the payroll they administer, furthermore, are often a focus for corruption.
- **Poor morale.** Officers find it hard to flourish in contexts where their competence and professionalism are not rewarded. Corruption at the top of the chain of command undermines the morale of troops, making them increasingly prone to corrupt practices themselves.
- **Misaligned or obsolete missions.** Many African militaries suffer from a lack of vision and clear objectives. An inclusive national security strategy is essential to align resources and training to the real security challenges African countries face.



PRESIDENTIAL GUARDS AND SPECIAL FORCES:

An Unchecked Source of Politicized Militaries

Elite security units are often major political actors in Africa. These units are better paid, equipped, trained, and supervised than the rest of the armed forces. When African presidential guards and special forces operate outside of the normal chain of command and are not controlled by the armed forces' chief of staff, they are commonly considered an army within an army.

Because they may report directly to the head of state, these units see their authority as being dependent on the president rather than the constitution or citizens. As a result, these presidential guards and special forces in Africa are loyal to their benefactor's cause at all costs. They generally do not feel constrained by legal strictures and their abuses are tolerated under the guise of national security. To maintain their pivotal role, moreover, these units are allergic to any reform that could call into question such privilege.

The tendency of special forces to develop an insular, elitist institutional culture as well as their proximity to power may cause leaders of these units to conclude that they are entitled to usurp national authority. Indeed, nearly all recent African coups have come from forces outside the conventional chain of command.

A UNIQUE RESPONSIBILITY

The military is the principal institution responsible for a country’s defense and protection. Enhancing military professionalism, therefore, is a vital element of African state-building. Challenges to constitutional order by the military and behavior contrary to the rule of law by military and political leaders alike threaten these goals—and with them prospects for development and democratic consolidation.

PRIORITIES FOR BUILDING PROFESSIONAL MILITARIES IN AFRICA	
Redefine the Military’s Mandate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop a national security strategy that can guide the reorganization of security force structures to better match the identified threat and integrate those missions into a comprehensive and coherent defense policy.• Redefine the mission, to include a military that is apolitical, accountable, capable, and affordable.• Support soldier development, including through focus on education and training—developing soldiers that are competent, compassionate, and respected.
Depoliticize the Environment in which Military Operate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inculcate a culture of democratic civilian control of the military.• Define the respective roles of military and political actors.• Ensure all military units including presidential guards and special forces operate in a single chain of command under a minister of defense.• Invest in professional military education and sustain partnerships with international actors with reputations for military professionalism.
Institutionalize Ethics and Accountability into Military Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthen military discipline by revisiting military codes of justice, the procedural and substantive laws that guide the military justice system.• Reward integrity in personnel promotions and strengthen the autonomy and capacity of military oversight mechanisms.• Enhance military procurement transparency and controls.• Strengthen legislative control of the military and institutionalize external audits.



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