



“An Epidemic of Coups” in Africa? Issues for Congress

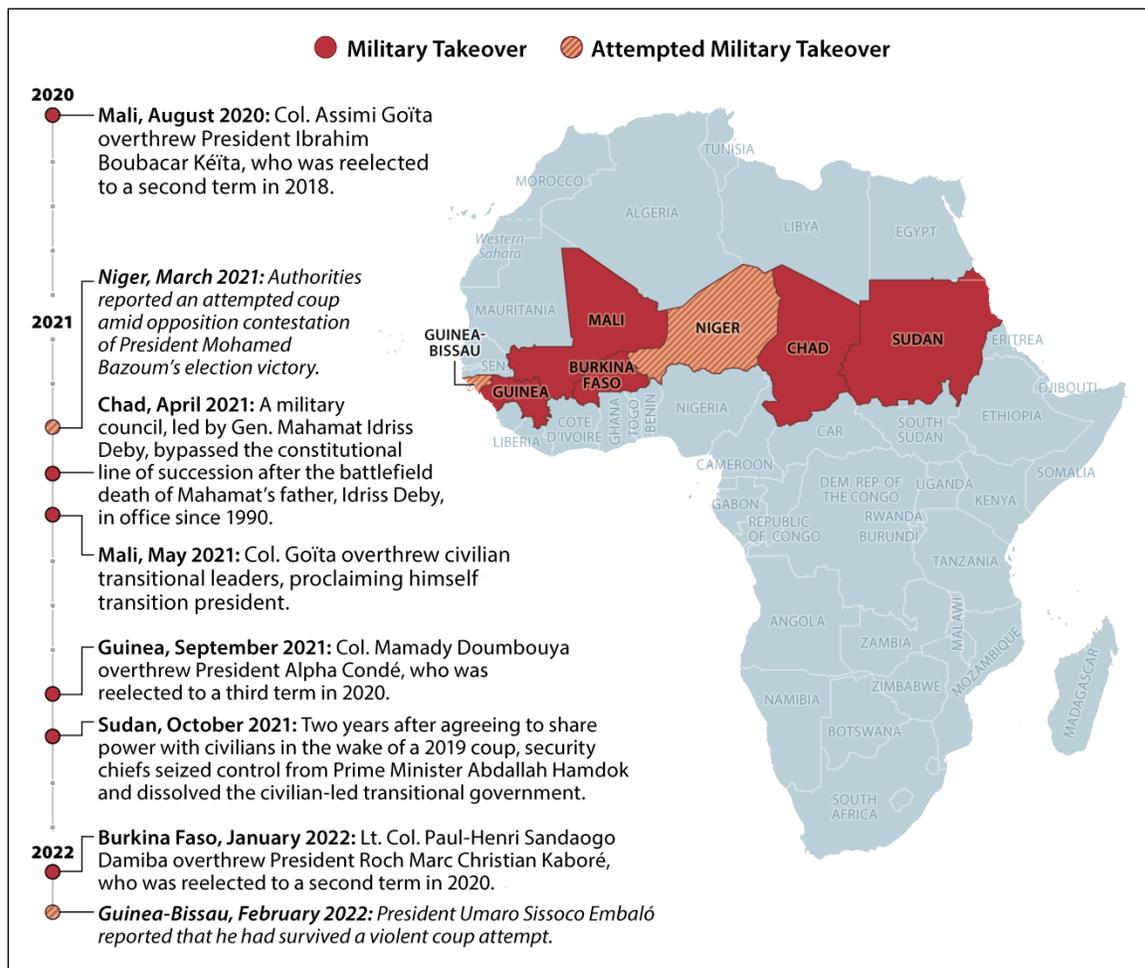
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Military officers have seized power in five African countries since 2020 (**Figure 1**), part of a trend the U.N. Secretary-General has [termed](#) “an epidemic of coups.” While military coups have long shaped African politics, their frequency [peaked during the Cold War](#). A more recent wave occurred in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger in 2008-2012, but regional tolerance seemed to decline. Recent coups challenge U.S. efforts to promote democracy and stability in Africa, complicate counterterrorism cooperation with several countries, and threaten a fragile post-authoritarian transition in Sudan that successive U.S. [Administrations and Congress have supported](#). They also raise fears of “contagion,” especially in [West Africa](#).

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Figure I. Military Takeovers and Selected Attempts in Africa Since 2020

Source: CRS graphic.

Note: Borders are not necessarily authoritative.

Military interventions both reflect and deepen a trend of [democratic backsliding in Africa](#). In Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali, ousted presidents were once popular figures who themselves ended previous periods of military rule. In Burkina Faso and Mali, however, they failed to curb [insurgent and militia violence](#) and [spiraling humanitarian crises](#). The coups in [Mali](#) and [Guinea](#) followed allegations of election fraud; in Guinea, former President Condé sought a contested [third term](#) and [cracked down](#) on opposing voices. Many citizens in these countries openly [welcomed](#) the coups, although [majorities reject military rule](#) in principle.

Divided reactions greeted the military's actions in Chad, following [decades of authoritarian rule and rebel uprisings](#) and the death of the president. In Sudan, protesters [cheered](#) a 2019 coup that ousted authoritarian President Omar al Bashir but opposed security forces' ensuing attempts to maintain control. [Ongoing protests](#) in Sudan underscore public opposition to the military's October 2021 power grab from civilian transition officials.

Several factors are at play across cases and exist elsewhere, including [tensions within the armed forces](#), allegations of high-level [corruption](#), and [economic pressures](#) worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Political instability in West Africa's Sahel region also coincides with [growing diplomatic tensions](#) with former colonial power France over the scope of its regional counterterrorism operations and other issues.

Russian military contractors recently [arrived in Mali](#); various actors may see opportunities in military rule.

Regional Responses

The African Union (AU) [rejects](#) “unconstitutional changes of governments” and suspended the memberships of Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan after recent coups. It [did not suspend Chad](#), where the military takeover prolonged the Déby family’s control. AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki once served as Chad’s foreign minister.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), often seen as a democratic bulwark, likewise suspended member states Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali, and [imposed sanctions](#) on junta members in Guinea and Mali after delays in scheduling new elections. [ECOWAS recently broadened its sanctions on Mali](#) to encompass trade, access to the regional central bank, and border crossings. On February 3, ECOWAS [announced](#) it would deploy a stabilization force to Guinea-Bissau.

The Biden Administration [praised ECOWAS’s recent actions](#). Intense [popular opposition](#) in Mali has challenged the bloc’s influence, however, while Guinea’s junta has [declined to enforce ECOWAS decisions](#) on Mali. With events in Burkina Faso, a dwindling number of ECOWAS’ [15 heads of state](#) are committed to civilian rule. The East African body to which Sudan belongs, known as [IGAD](#), has not taken punitive action in response to the recent coup there.

Selected Issues for Congress

Oversight of U.S. Security Cooperation. Coups have disrupted some U.S. security cooperation activities and led [observers](#) to question the impact of prior military engagement, including counterterrorism activities. While prior U.S. training of junta leaders in [Burkina Faso](#), [Guinea](#), and [Mali](#) is unlikely to have directly caused their actions, policymakers may examine whether external support for specialized units contributed to intra-military and/or civil-military tensions, and whether existing courses emphasizing civilian control are effective. Country- and unit-level funding allocations under U.S. regional security programs are not routinely available, presenting a [potential oversight challenge](#).

Coup-Related Aid Restrictions and Implications. Section 7008 of annual foreign aid appropriations legislation restricts certain aid to the governments of countries in which the military has overthrown a “duly elected” leader. (See CRS In Focus IF11267, *Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations*.) Section 7008 is in effect for Mali, Guinea, and Sudan (due to a previous coup in 1989), although Congress has exempted some aid for Sudan. The Biden Administration determined that it did not apply to Chad. Officials have paused “[most](#)” aid to Burkina Faso pending a determination.

U.S. officials may review and suspend some programming under other laws or as a matter of policy. The Millennium Challenge Corporation [suspended activities related to](#) a five-year, \$450 million development aid compact in Burkina Faso, citing its own [eligibility requirements](#). The Administration [suspended](#) most of a \$700 million aid allocation for Sudan in October.

U.S. officials have not consistently used the term “coup” to refer to events, due to differing circumstances and related considerations around the application of Section 7008. Members of Congress may examine whether perceived inconsistency in U.S. messaging and/or application of aid restrictions are affecting U.S. credibility, and if so, whether legislative changes are warranted.

Other Potential Deterrence Tools. Policymakers may consider sanctions and other measures to deter further coups. Whether these alter local calculations is [debated](#). Sanctions programs exist for select countries, including a [Mali program](#) that targets those engaged in “actions or policies that undermine

democratic processes or institutions,” among other activities. The Biden Administration established a new [country-specific sanctions regime](#) in response to the 2021 coup in Burma, but such action has not followed coups elsewhere.

No U.S. sanctions program with global scope currently allows designations specifically for military interventions in politics. The [Global Magnitsky program](#) pertains to human rights abuses and corruption, which are often at issue in coup-affected countries. The executive branch also has broad authority to restrict travel to the United States, which previous Administrations wielded after previous coups in [Guinea](#) (2008) and [Mali](#) (2012). The Biden Administration has not announced such measures in response to recent coups in Africa, but did [suspend](#) Guinea and Mali’s eligibility for trade benefits under the [African Growth and Opportunity Act \(AGOA\)](#). Burkina Faso and Chad currently are [AGOA beneficiaries](#).

Pressure on coup leaders may be applied multilaterally. In Sudan, international financial institutions have [paused disbursements](#) and progress toward [debt relief](#). The European Union has [pledged](#) to back ECOWAS sanctions against Mali.

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