

**Onwumechili, Chuka.** *African Democratization and Military Coups.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.

The author begins this book with the astonishing observation that, by 1995, more than half of Africa's countries had democratic governments. Onwumechili then warns the reader that these democracies have yet to be "consolidated" and that there is a constant threat of military coups against democratic governments throughout Africa.

Onwumechili maintains that militaries justify coups by stressing their commitment to developing the country, guarding the nation against internal and external enemies, or promoting democracy. African governments, on the other hand, seek to prevent military coups by using constitutional means, relying on special military units to protect government leaders, co-opting the military into democratic governments, or reducing the size of the military or its budget.

To support these points, the author examines nine cases (Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Zambia) of countries with emerging democracies and nine other cases (Benin, Burundi, Ghana, Nigeria, Republic of Congo-Brazzaville, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Togo and Uganda) of nations that have experienced military coups.

Onwumechili's selection of countries is sure to provoke at least some consternation from his readers. The notion that nations like Liberia and Sierra Leone were ever democracies is difficult to accept. Also, irregularities during the recent presidential election in Benin shows that even countries with a long democratic heritage have a very thin veneer of good governance.

Lastly, Onwumechili believes that the only way to ensure the consolidation of democracy in Africa is for the Organization of African Unity (OAU), soon to be rechristened the African Union (AU), to establish a military force that will have "the capability to prevent or extinguish coups in any part of the continent."

The suggestion of turning the OAU into a political police force borders on fantasy. The OAU's charter, as the author points out, prevents that organization from interfering in the internal affairs of member states. Moreover, the notion that African military forces, operating under the OAU's banner, would invade countries to overthrow governments that had been established by military coups would be a sure way of spreading rather than limiting conflict.

The trouble with Onwumechili's analysis, which undoubtedly is shared by a host of African and Western academicians and civil servants, is that African democracy is little more than a political cliché. Those with an interest in sustaining the myth of African democracy include African elites and Western experts, both of which profit from the hundreds of millions of dollars spent by donors and international financial institutions to support the growth of nebulous concepts such as good governance, transparency and accountability. Thus, countries like Eritrea, Rwanda, and Uganda - all of which are

plagued by serious governance problems - are touted as some of the continent's best democracies. This despite the fact that there is no chance that the ruling party in any of these nations would be voted out of office. Botswana, a country often held up as a democratic example for the rest of the continent, has been a one-party state since independence.

By focusing on military coups largely reminiscent of the Cold War, the author fails to address the dramatic change that has occurred over the past decade in the nature of the relationship between African governments and militaries. For example, there are several countries (e.g. Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Uganda) where guerrilla groups have become national armies while their former commanders have become political leaders who devote considerable energy to trying to convince the citizenry and the international community that they head democratic governments. However, individuals and groups opposed to such governments frequently accuse them of being undemocratic or little more than military dictatorships.

Another curious phenomenon that has emerged in recent years concerns armies that profit from wars. The Rwandan, Ugandan and Zimbabwean intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo afforded officers the opportunity to plunder the resources of that country. Many of these military mercantilists undoubtedly became millionaires in the process. Prospects of additional wealth is one reason why it is so difficult to end this war.

Political, economic and social grievances coupled with the easy availability of weapons has fueled the proliferation of guerrilla groups throughout Africa. Their existence reflects the weakness, fragility and, oftentimes, the incompetence and corruption of national and local governments that claim to be democracies.

***Tom Ofcansky***

*US Department of State*