



From Praetorian Guards to National Armies

The greatest service they [members of the officer corps] can render is to remain true to themselves, to serve with silence and courage in the military way. If they abjure the military spirit, they destroy themselves first and their nation ultimately.

—Samuel P. Huntington

After African independences, new political authorities made the army the ultimate symbol of sovereignty—as a means of ensuring defense and territorial integrity as well as a foundation for nation building. Soon, however, this military institution went astray and vitiated the process of building a state of law, stifling in various countries all forms of political, social, and economic service to the people. Drifting away from its traditional mission of preserving the sovereignty and integrity of the territory, the army insidiously imposed itself as an instrument of power. Bullets instead of elections became the safest and quickest method of gaining control of the state: the coup d'état as violence for founding a new order became the norm. It is symptomatic that in Africa a successful coup is almost always greeted with enthusiasm by people affected by the old order, deceived by the junta's promises for democratization and development.

Several presidents came to power through a coup d'état. They know that without the loyalty of the military, their powers are ephemeral. Therefore, they spend considerable money on presidential security brigades and other elite troops, giving command of these forces to people close to them. These units consist of individuals from the same clan, ethnic group, or party. The army becomes a tool not only for conquest but also for keeping power; for protecting regimes, not states; and for generating corruption that permeates all levels of command. Thus, more than half a century after independence—and with the exception of a handful of countries with actual military capabilities—almost no African army can defend its own national territory. As an institution, the military loses its constitutional function of protecting citizens and becomes a quasi-private security force that protects a system from which it benefits—in effect becoming a praetorian guard. The civilian population, whose constitutional rights and duties give it control of the military, has often become both the object and victim of armed dictatorship. This reversal of roles has had disastrous consequences for the political stability and development of nations. The fact that even today some leaders of the security sector are ready to shoot unarmed civilians clearly confirms that they continue to think of their duty in

terms of defending the regime in power rather than the constitution. Such a stance goes against the basic codes of military conduct and democratic standards.

Clearly, democratic control of the security sector is essential for the rule of law. This may differ from one state to another, but the goals and principles are the same—transparency and accountability. Throughout history, no state's military has remained completely separate from the political structure, but the objective is to have real armies and security forces effective in fulfilling their constitutional duties, subject to civilian authorities and transparent governance. African countries are trying to restructure and professionalize their armies, police, and intelligence services; however, the reform of African armies begins with good governance by the states.

International partners have a substantial role to play in these reforms. Africa is not threatened by a military invasion from foreign countries; furthermore, it is unlikely that interstate wars will reoccur. Nevertheless, armies prepare for conventional wars by Western countries even though the real threat is terrorism. Military training must address terrorism, which is gaining ground in Africa. The substantial military aid to states that have no enemies other than their own people is one of the anomalies of international relations. Paradoxically, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the guarantor of peace and development—are responsible for the majority of weapons sales, directly or indirectly, to these states, regardless of how they are used. International partners should focus more, or at least as much, on educating African officers in governance and accountability than on their military education. More specifically, partnerships in security matters should favor the more democratic countries because they are more likely to contribute to regional stability. Finally, the rule of law: although some coups d'état against a dictatorial regime became popular and accepted by the people as well as the international community, they remain unconstitutional. There are no legitimate coups. Military intervention in some cases allows building a democratic civil authority by organizing elections after the coup, but it is wrong in principle because such intervention involves falling back into the unconstitutionality from which Africa must free itself.

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