

Beyond Africa: Militaries Are Back in an Age of Democratic Backsliding

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The **peak of military coups that has been recorded in 2021 in sub-Saharan Africa** unquestionably represents a threat for the present and future of democracy in a continent with a legacy of frequent violent leadership changes. Even if contemporary military takeovers are often accompanied by the promise of a rapid restoration of elections, the interference of the armed forces in the politics of these countries **hinders the consolidation of the democratic principle that government power must be assigned and handed over through periodic, free, and fair electoral contests.**

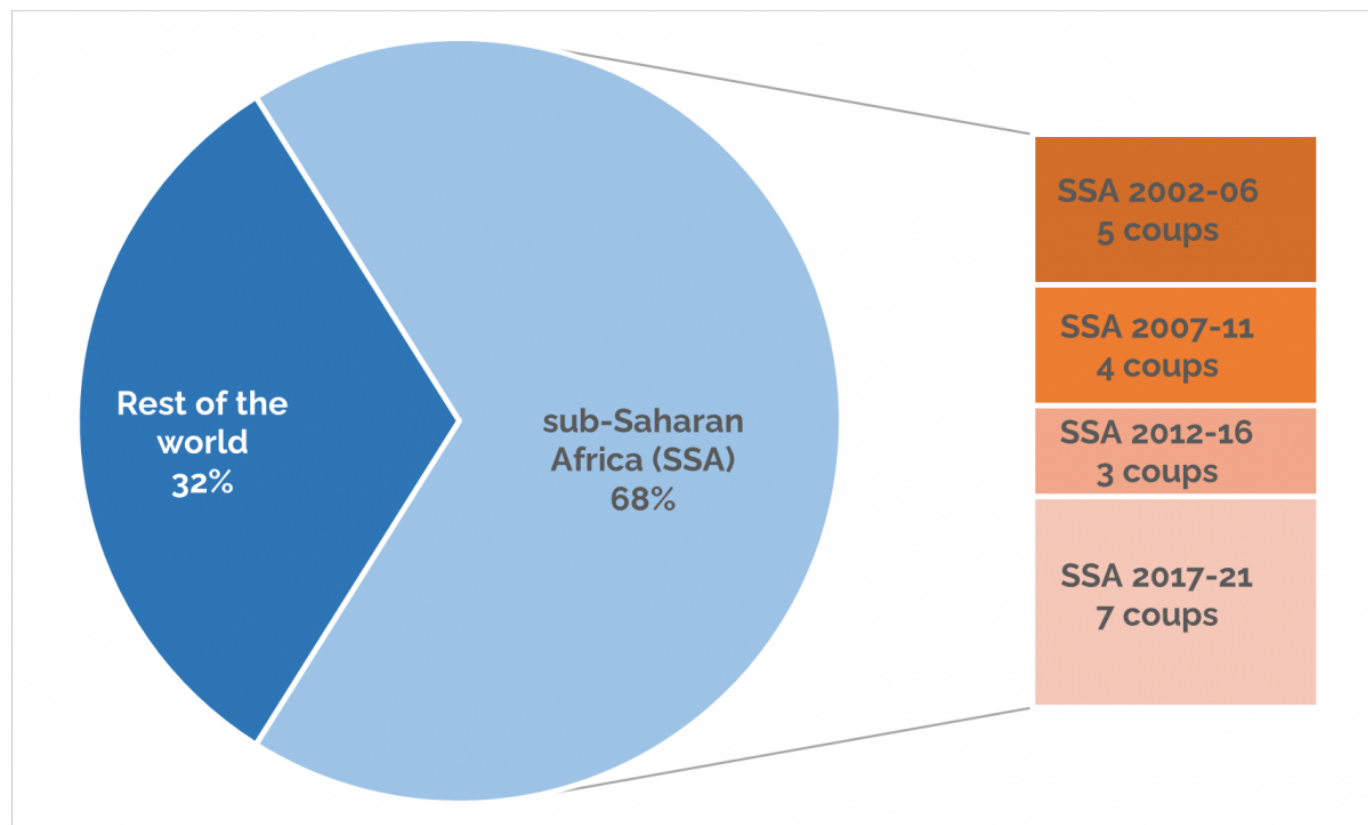
Yet, is the recent upsurge of military coups in the south of the Sahara a region-

specific phenomenon? Unfortunately, the return of the men in uniform in the political arena **neither is confined to sub-Saharan Africa, nor does it represent the only signal that the world might be entering a phase of democratic backsliding.**

Figure 1 summarizes the frequency of **military coups occurred during the past twenty years in sub-Saharan Africa vis-à-vis the rest of the world.** Overall, **fifteen coups** have been staged successfully between 2012 and 2021, two more cases than those recorded in the previous decade (2002-2011). The pie chart vividly shows that sub-Saharan states have experienced the largest share of these events (68%). Zooming in on this region, the stacked bar chart on the right side of Figure 1 separates four five-year periods. This highlights a recent reversal in the trend that coup frequency has followed throughout the past two decades, which has been decreasing until the mid-2010s only to re-intensify over the five most recent years.

While XXI century military coups are a predominantly sub-Saharan phenomenon, about **one-third of these events occurred elsewhere.** Focusing on the most recent cases, the list includes the 2013 military takeover in **Egypt**, which peremptorily brought to an end the experience of the so-called Arab Spring, and the one occurred in **Thailand** the following year. Both the leaders of these coups – namely, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Commander in Chief Prayut Chan-o-cha – are still in power, formally elected as President of Egypt and Prime Minister of Thailand, respectively. Most recently, on 1 February 2021, **Myanmar's** armed forces overturned the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy of the November 2020 elections, arrested the head of the government Aung San Suu Kyi, and formed a military junta.

Figure 1. Military coups in the world, 2002-2021



Source: Coup d'état Dataset

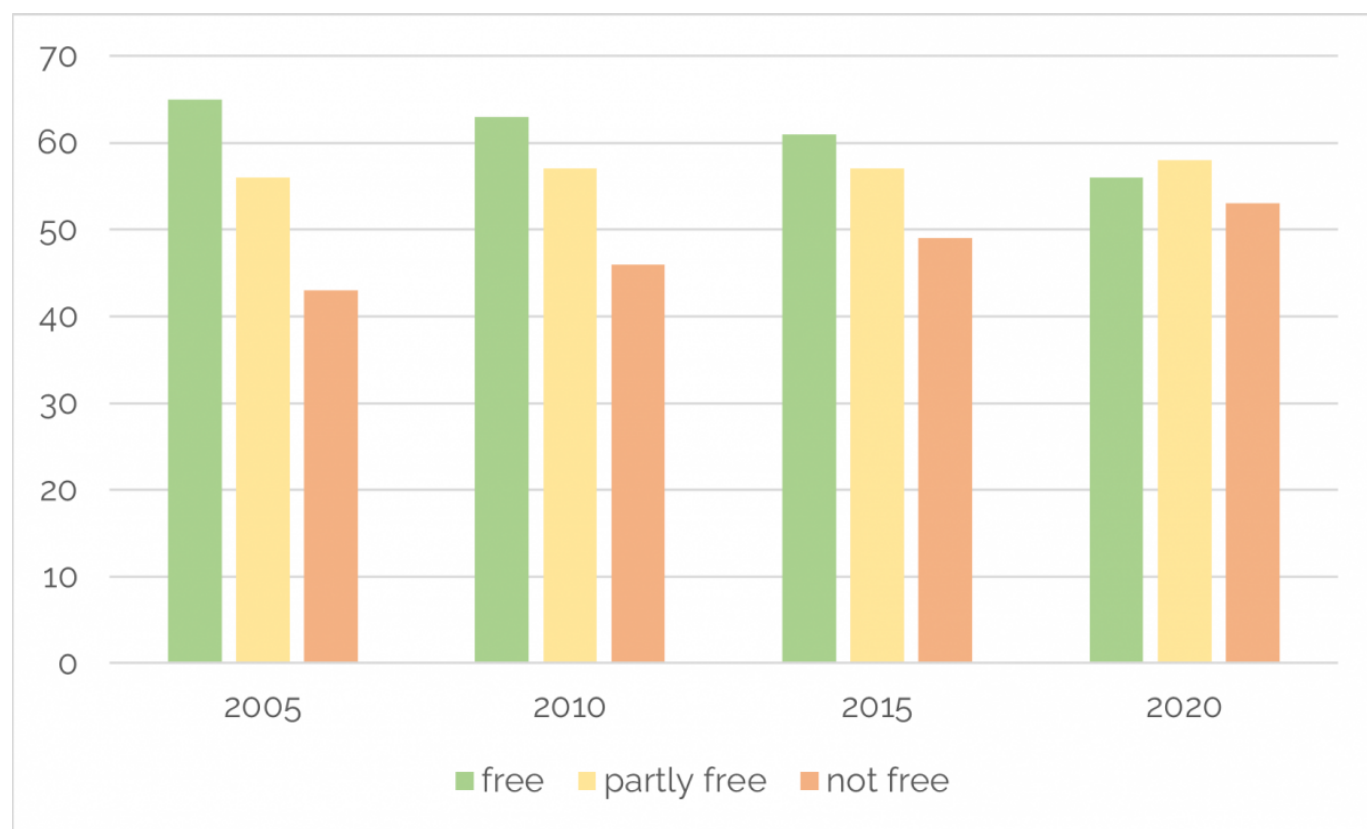
While the armed forces are regaining centre stage as political actors in a number of states in sub-Saharan Africa as well as in other regions, the rise in the number of military coups is not the only challenge that global democracy is facing. Indeed, they represent but **one highly visible symptom of a more general and multifaceted syndrome**. Since the mid-2000s, the world seems to have entered a new phase wherein a growing number of **democratic countries are backsliding into old and new forms of authoritarianism**.

Figure 2 captures the changes in **the global state of political freedom** occurred during the past fifteen years. Each group of bars summarizes the raw number of countries that Freedom House classifies as “free” (or democratic), “partly free” (or semi-democratic), and “not free” (or non-democratic) at five-year intervals, from 2005 to 2020. **In 2005, there were 65 free countries**, one of the highest numbers ever recorded, which has been decreasing ever since, though, especially since 2015. **In 2020, we count 56 free countries**, whereas partly free states represent the largest group. The latter encompasses a rather heterogeneous collection of

“hybrid” regimes, wherein some elements of democracy – such as periodic multiparty elections – coexist with authoritarian practices – such as limitations to freedom of expression and electoral manipulation.

Once again, **sub-Saharan Africa** is but one of the regions most affected by the ongoing wave of democratic backsliding, as the list includes **Latin America and Eastern Europe**, too. Another worrisome trend refers to the growing number of countries rated as not free; and the picture is even gloomier if we consider the list of **partly free and not free countries includes some of the world's most populated countries**, such as China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Russia, Mexico, and recently India.

Figure 2. Free, partly free and not free countries in the world, 2005-2020



Source: Freedom House

Note: Only countries with more than one million inhabitants are considered.

Should we resign ourselves to live in a world that is less democratic than it used to

be? There are reasons to refrain from a similar conclusion. First, as anticipated, the increased frequency with which the armed forces take political power in their own countries is only part of the story that explains the current global wave of democratic backsliding. **More often than not** (and differently from what happened, for instance, in the 1950s-1970s in Latin America and Africa), contemporary **democratic backsliding results from the attempt of civilian rulers to manipulate rather than abrogate elections**. As long as electoral rule survives, windows of opportunity for political change and democratic renewal will periodically (re-)open.

Second, a closer look at the data shows that backsliding has been experienced **mainly by countries whose democratic institutions were relatively “young” and fragile**. Accordingly, some of the political events that could be interpreted as democratic **backsliding** from a short-term perspective **may in fact turn to be setbacks in a longer-term process of democratization**. If we look back at the experience of many Western democracies (which have thus far proved resilient to the current wave of backsliding), we can easily find cases in which **democratization proceeded in fits and starts before taking decades to consolidate**.

The **Covid-19 pandemic** is another factor that could influence the present and future of global democracy. Crises and states of emergency have historically represented critical junctures and drivers of political change. In the past year, several **autocrats and would-be autocrats have exploited the pandemic to more aggressively silence dissent and crack down on their critics**, as reported by research centres such as Freedom House, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, The Economist Intelligence Unit, and Varieties of Democracy. In the medium-to-long term, however, the management of the Covid-19's health, social, and economic implications will challenge the legitimacy of these despots and possibly revitalize opposition movements demanding democratic change.

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