

Trajectories following military coups d'état (January 2025)

Military coups d'état are on the rise, especially in Africa, which saw six successful (and three attempted) military coups between 2020-22. Coups are generally followed by the suspension of formal politics, meaning civil society must fill this role, which involves significant challenges and risks. This document presents an overview of some of the potential trajectories for post-coup transitional periods, with a focus on the role of civil society.

Each military coup takes place within a specific context that not only determines the conditions of the coup itself, but also the post-coup political transition. Nevertheless, research has shown that certain patterns and similarities are discernible when analysing these political events.

Research has consistently shown that most coups result in the withdrawal of military juntas from executive power and a transition back to civilian rule, although this is not the case in every context and transitions vary greatly in their trajectories and timelines. The average timeline for a return to civilian rule is four years, and most long-term autocrats are not serving military figures. However, there are many cases where the military maintains a significant role in politics and the economy by co-opting political parties or candidates or operating military-owned conglomerates, including where coup leaders transition into personalist autocrats.

Following a military takeover, a coup government most often operates under a state of emergency, which usually affords a coup government legislative and executive powers that extend beyond the purview of a democratically-elected government. This is usually justified by coup leaders as a temporary measure to ensure stability while a plan to transition back to civilian rule is enacted. However, these supposedly temporary measures are often extended repeatedly, and in some cases indefinitely.

Likely trajectories and scenarios in post-coup political transitions can be organised according to the period elapsed since the military coup itself. This paper will focus on short- and medium term scenarios in this respect, with a specific focus on the impact of these scenarios on civilian rule and civic space, since long-term trajectories and “completed” transitions are more difficult to tangibly define. In this context, “short-term” refers to the first year following the occurrence of the coup itself, and “medium-term” to the continued trajectories after the first year post-coup.

According to existing research, certain key factors have been found to impact both the short and medium-term trajectories of post-coup political transitions. In particular, the internal coherence of the armed forces and the ability of civil society and political parties to mobilise against the junta have significant influence over the outcomes of coups. This highlights the importance of protecting civic space and civil society activity during such political transitions, as civil society advocacy and organising has been found to decrease the likelihood of the establishment of authoritarian governments following military coups.

While each post-coup trajectory is context specific and shaped by a combination of factors - including the broader socio-political context of the state prior to the coup, the circumstances of the coup itself, and the key actors in the post-coup environment - certain common factors and patterns can be identified regarding the short-term impact of military coups on civic space. Drawing on comparative evidence and cases from a variety of country contexts, some of these examples are listed in the table below.

SHORT-TERM:

Signs of closing civic space	Signs of opening (or maintained) civic space
Crackdown on opposition/civil society activity	Openness to discussion/deliberation with civilian counterparts outside of the military regime
Dismissal of all civilian leaders and replacement with military figures	Establishment of interim civilian government
Direct military control of state administrative functions	Preservation of civilian bureaucracy
Suspension of constitutional protections (especially freedoms of association and from arbitrary detention and torture)	Commitment to protection of civil and social rights
State of emergency is repeatedly extended	Military government sticks to transition timeline
Closing of borders and denouncement of external influence/actors (isolationism)	Openness to alliances with external actors and other

As indicated, certain immediate steps taken by a military regime to either consolidate their own power or to establish a transitional government will directly result in certain forced shifts in the nature of civic space and civil society activity. While these initial changes may be indicative of the military regime's intentions and ambitions for governance going forward, post-coup contexts, by way of their inherent instability, are prone to sudden and often unpredictable changes. As such, post-coup scenarios in the medium-term may be viewed on a spectrum. Ranging from the total solidification of military control over government to a successful transition back to civilian rule, these scenarios will evolve over time, usually on a non-linear trajectory. The following table aims to delineate this spectrum by identifying five indicative, although not comprehensive, post-coup scenarios based on comparative evidence and case studies from various country contexts.

Post-coup scenario	Examples
Military regime remains in power and becomes an authoritarian regime (no return to civilian rule)	<p>Pinochet regime, Chile: Following the 1973 coup in Chile, the Pinochet regime suspended constitutional guarantees, dissolved Congress and declared a state of emergency throughout the country. Dissenting voices were dealt with by the regime through enforced disappearances and the use of torture. During the post-coup transition period, Pinochet's 1980 constitution gave the executive branch emergency powers to suspend civil rights for an unspecified duration, including the right to protest. Despite attempts to severely restrict civil liberties, civil society itself was able to rebuild strong social ties and solidarity following the coup through community kitchens, centres for unemployed workers, children's canteens, and human rights and labour groups. From the beginning of the Pinochet regime, it was clear that the military had no interest or intention of transitioning back to civilian rule. All of the policies that the regime implemented were designed to increase military influence over the political process, while also limiting the power and influence of traditional political parties and civil society groups.</p> <p>State Administration Council Tatmadaw regime, Myanmar: In February 2021, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, deposed the democratically-elected members of the National League for Democracy, citing invalid results from the 2020 election as the main reason for the coup. A year-long state of emergency was declared, and armed insurgencies erupted throughout Myanmar in response to the military's violent crackdown on anti-coup protests. Since the coup, the junta has extended the state of emergency several times but continues to lose territory to non-state groups.</p>

Post-coup scenario	Examples
	Despite severe constricting of civic space - from restricting freedom of assembly and freedom of speech (including on social media) to targeting activists for persecution and arrest - the junta continues to face opposition from the general population and pro-democracy groups.
Military regimes appears inclusive of a variety of stakeholders (including civil society) in post-coup processes but this inclusion is superficial, becomes more repressive and civic space is increasingly co-opted and can be seen to shrink at any sign of criticism of the regime (increased restriction placed on civil society activity in response to a shift in public perceptions, most relevant in contexts where a military coup was initially supported/accepted by the public)	<p>Guinea, 2021: The military coup in Guinea that took place in September 2021 deposed President Alpha Condé, the country's first democratically-elected leader following decades of authoritarian rule. Towards the end of his second term, Condé orchestrated a constitutional coup that would allow him to run for reelection once again. The lead up to the referendum and the elections were marked by violent repression of opposition protests, during which several protesters were killed. The military coup, orchestrated by a group of special forces soldiers, followed soon after. The President was ousted and taken hostage, the government and constitution were dissolved, and all land and air borders were closed. The coup was initially widely welcomed, and received support both from Condé's main opposition party and the FNDC, a citizens' movement that had led protests against Condé's political manoeuvring. Following the coup, the military authorities formed the National Committee of Reconciliation and Development (CNRD) as the main governing body. The CNRD took a number of popular steps in the period immediately following the coup, including steps to promote social cohesion by making overtures to political parties, civil society, religious actors, etc. In addition, the CNRD made clear its commitment to establish a civilian-led constitutional order by the end of 2024, giving Guineans a definitive timeline for a return to democracy.</p> <p>However, three years after the coup, initial optimism has largely faded. By the end of 2024, it seemed clear that the junta had no intention of relinquishing its power to a civilian government. For example, no budget has been allocated by the CNRD for elections. In addition, the junta has forbidden all forms of demonstration and protest, and continues to tighten its control over the media and NGOs. Despite these challenges, Guinean CSOs continue to advocate for a peaceful and inclusive transition to democracy.</p>

Post-coup scenario	Examples
<p>Military regime follows the transition plan to multi-party elections but tries to retain power/influence in political sphere by creating its own party or co-opting an existing party or candidate</p>	<p>Mauritania, 2008/2009: In August 2008, President Abdallahi, Mauritania's first democratically elected leader, was deposed in a coup led by the former head of his official guard, Abdel Aziz. This occurred after the President announced the dismissal of four generals, including Abdel Aziz, the leader of this coup as well as of the coup that took place in 2005. The purpose of the coup, beyond airing the grievances of prominent military members, was unclear. It was particularly disappointing given that the 2005 coup had been followed by a successful two-year transition which led to the peaceful transfer of power to a civilian government, although the coup leaders retained prominent leadership positions and remained close to the seat of government and power. This suggests that, despite the successful transition to civilian rule, the return to constitutional order may not have incorporated sufficient guarantees for civilian rule going forward, including clear separation between the military and civilian government. Decades of dictatorship had severely compromised civil institutions, political parties, and the state apparatus. It seems that in 2008, despite being democratically elected, President Abdallahi both overestimated the strength of the state institutions and authority, and underestimated the power and popularity of the military. Elections were scheduled for 2009 - peaceful protests by political parties and civil society organisations against the electoral timetable announced by the junta were met with violent repression. Abdel Aziz, the leader of the 2008 coup, stepped down as head of the High State Council, the transitional governing body, to stand as a candidate in the election. He won an absolute majority of the popular vote, thus becoming president-elect. Despite allegations of electoral fraud by opposition parties, both Mauritanian and European observers deemed the elections to be transparent.</p> <p>Zimbabwe, 2017/2018: The military coup in Zimbabwe in 2017 was itself unusual. The army seized control of the state but did not introduce a state of emergency, suspend the constitution, or even depose the President, as would normally be expected during a military takeover. President Mugabe himself declared the actions of the military as legitimate, and four days into the takeover, during his impeachment hearing, Mugabe resigned from his position as President. The coup occurred days after former First Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was backed by the Zimbabwean Defence Forces, was fired and forced to flee the country.</p>

Post-coup scenario	Examples
	<p>Following the coup, Mnangagwa became interim President, before resigning so that he could run in the 2018 presidential elections. He marginally won the election, becoming President-elect, but international observers pointed to irregularities within the electoral process, including voter intimidation and bribery as well as a lack of media coverage for opposition parties and candidates. An idiosyncratic feature of the Zimbabwean political landscape, in both pre-colonial and post-colonial times, is the influence and resilience of the institution of traditional leadership, as a result of its strong community functions. Due to their ability to mobilise public support, traditional leaders' loyalty was bought through material benefits and powers by Mugabe's regime. While slightly more covert since the 2018 elections, the privileges enjoyed by traditional chiefs are still in existence today. There is some evidence to suggest that these leaders may have even influenced the results of the elections by manipulating the decisions of their communities.</p> <p>Myanmar, 2010: The 2010 elections in Myanmar marked the first elections in 20 years, following the 1990 coup led by the military junta. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Myanmar's biggest military-backed party, won by a landslide with approximately 80% of votes. The junta claimed that the election was a key step in the transition from military rule to civilian democracy, but pro-democracy parties and opposition groups in Myanmar have alleged electoral fraud and insinuated that the election was a means for the junta to preserve authoritarian rule. At the time of the election, USPD's leadership consisted mainly of retired generals, with close ties to senior figures in the junta itself. In addition, following the USDP's merger with a powerful pro-military organisation (USDA), the party inherited considerable financial resources and millions of USDA's members. Prior to the election itself, civil society actors including journalists and formal and informal NGOs were involved in conducting civic and voter education activities in order to actively engage in the electoral process. Discussions about the new constitution served as a starting point for these activities, based on the assumption that engaging in the government-led reform process was more beneficial for political change than implementing boycotts and sanctions. This approach stood in contrast to earlier attempts in Myanmar to achieve political change through revolutions in the form of public protests, like those in 1988 or in 2007.</p>

Post-coup scenario	Examples
	<p>Following widespread accusations of USDP's voter intimidation tactics and electoral fraud, at least six Burmese political parties lodged complaints with the electoral commission regarding the fairness and validity of the election. However, given the restricted and oppressive political and civil environment created by the junta, this investigation stalled in its early stages. Overall, the 2010 elections in Myanmar may be viewed as an important step in the military's promised transition back to civilian rule, while simultaneously working to better ensure continued military dominance of the political space and the Myanmar state.</p>
<p>Transition from military to civilian rule occurs on paper, but in reality the military retains power and influence over aspects of governance through existing neo-patrimonialist networks - illusion of civilian control but without any meaningful steps towards democratisation</p>	<p>Mali, post-2012 coup: After the 2012 coup was dismantled, the existing neo-patrimonialist network maintained a firm grip over security governance. All strategic positions were offered to close allies of the president, and the legislative committee was created more to silence debate rather than encourage it. The new government pursued a strategy of accumulating resources at the core, benefiting predominantly the central elite (including members of the military who led the 2012 coup), and neglecting the "ungovernable" periphery. This process did nothing to reinforce civilian oversight, and in many ways bolstered the elite that the junta was denouncing through its military takeover in 2012. Malian civil society was unable to protect the public good in this instance as most leaders of public advocacy groups, political parties, and media outlets were embedded in the same clientelist networks as state officials. This new reality spurred many Malian activists, intentionally distancing themselves from established civil society organisations, into action. During the months that followed the coup, they organised meetings, formed new political associations, and used the internet, social media and private TV/radio stations to circumvent government restrictions in communicating on behalf of their organisations. Research has shown that groups that formed more or less spontaneously in early 2012 managed to make their voices heard and influence the political process despite, or perhaps because of, their disconnection from existing political structures. Activists rebuffed co-option efforts by the junta and politicians, and offered a critique of existing civil society organisations.</p>

Post-coup scenario	Examples
<p>Transitional government reforms the electoral system, oversees the drafting of a new constitution, and hands over power to newly-elected civilian rulers - the military returns to the barracks (clear separation of power between military and civilian government)</p>	<p>Niger, 2010/2011: Following an attempt by President Tandja to alter the constitution in order to remove term limits and increase the powers of the President, a group of soldiers stormed the presidential palace and took the President captive. The junta leaders set up a governing body called the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy, but made no mention of an election timetable or a plan to transition to civilian rule in the immediate aftermath of the coup. However, because the coup occurred in the context of an attempted constitutional coup by the President, many in Niger saw the coup as a hopeful sign of change. Niger's main opposition group also lent its support to the coup leaders, while also calling for a return to constitutional order. The international community also applied significant pressure on the military leaders to cede power swiftly. Despite initial ambiguity surrounding future elections, the junta followed through on its initial promises to transfer power back to a civilian government. A new constitution was adopted at the end of 2010 and a 'republican pact' - ensuring democratic guarantees of civilian rule and delineating the role of the military - was signed by both military and civilian authorities. Presidential elections took place in early 2011, during which no junta members ran for election - opposition leader Mahamadou Issoufou won with 58% of the vote.</p> <p>Guinea-Bissau, 2012-2014: Guinea-Bissau saw two military coups during the course of 2012. The first was orchestrated by prominent military figures when the prime minister Carlos Gomes Júnior, who was the favoured candidate to win the presidency following the second round of presidential elections, announced his plans for significant military reforms upon his election as President. Civilian-military relations have been tense since Guinea-Bissau's independence, with the military enjoying significant and extensive power. The purpose of the second coup was less clear but was orchestrated by another unit within the military, so may have resulted from in-fighting within the military authorities. Transitional structures were set up and elections set for April 2013; the junta was officially dissolved but remained influential. Some analysts argued that, despite officially dissolving the junta, military authorities had no intention of allowing themselves to be controlled by civilian oversight. The second coup in 2012 may have changed this, as it suggested weaknesses within the military itself. Legislative and presidential elections were eventually held in 2014 and seemed to signal the acceptance by the military of civilian oversight - the leader of the April 2012 coup publicly saluted the president-elect, who defeated the second place candidate despite the latter's backing by the military.</p>