

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

---

Volume 45  
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2015*

Article 4

---

Summer 6-1-2015

## Security Assistance in Africa: The Case for More

Kristen A. Harkness

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kristen A. Harkness, "Security Assistance in Africa: The Case for More," *Parameters* 45, no. 2 (2015), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol45/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

## Security Assistance in Africa: The Case for More

---

Kristen A. Harkness

© 2015 Kristen A. Harkness

**ABSTRACT:** This article argues that political tampering with military recruitment and promotion practices, especially the construction and dismantling of ethnically based armies, has led African militaries to intervene in politics in order to block or reverse democratization efforts. The entrenchment of politically insulated, merit-based military institutions is thus necessary to deepen democracy in Africa. The United States can assist by offering protection, training, and financial incentives to encourage reform.

Promoting peace and security in Africa through the establishment of democratic institutions and good governance has been prioritized by the Obama administration as a key US foreign policy concern.<sup>1</sup> Weak and failed states threaten national security because they “attract destabilizing forces.” Unable to control their borders or police their territory internally, such states provide breeding grounds and transit routes for terrorist organizations, drug cartels, weapons traffickers, and other criminal networks.<sup>2</sup> For example, poor governance and rampant conflict in northern Nigeria and Somalia have given rise to two of the continent’s most dangerous terrorist organizations, Boko Haram and al Shabaab, while persistent political instability and poverty in Guinea Bissau have led that country to become an international hub for drug trafficking.

Democracy is seen as a long-term solution to this threat because democratic institutions remove many of the underlying causes of state weakness. Democracy creates peaceful channels for resolving social conflict, alleviating incentives for domestic strife. Democracies are more politically inclusive, remedying the systemic exclusion of ethnic groups from political power; this kind of exclusion is a known driver of insurgency, as often occurred at the hands of autocratic rulers.<sup>3</sup> Democracy is also associated with the rule of law, which both dampens popular grievances and provides a stable context for investment, entrepreneurship,

---

1 Johnnie Carson, “US-Africa Policy Under the Obama Administration (Remarks to the Harvard University Africa Focus Program),” April 5, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/2010/139462.htm>.

2 US Department of the Army, *Stability Operations*, Field Manual 3-07 (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, 2008), 1:11; and US Department of State, *Conflict Prevention and Crisis Response: Responding to Emerging Instability Overseas*, June 21, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/211773.pdf>.

3 Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, “Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis,” *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (January 2010): 87-119; Philip Roessler, “The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa,” *World Politics* 62, no. 2 (April 2011): 300-346; and Andreas Wimmer, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Brian Min, “Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict: A Configurational Analysis of a New Global Data Set,” *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 2 (April 2009): 316-337.

Dr. Harkness is a Lecturer in International Relations at the University of St. Andrews. She previously held a postdoctoral fellowship at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame after earning her PhD in Comparative Politics and International Relations from Princeton University.

and other determinants of economic growth, thereby raising populations out of poverty. Strengthening democratic institutions and protecting democratic gains have thus become core principles of both US policy toward Africa and the strategic approach adopted by Africa Command (AFRICOM).<sup>4</sup>

Yet, democracy is in decline. Larry Diamond argues that since the turn of the 21st century, “there has been a significant and, in fact, accelerating rate of democratic breakdown” with at least 25 democracies having collapsed since 2000—a failure rate of 17.6 percent.<sup>5</sup> Africa, in particular, has struggled deeply with democratization. Despite the passing of over 20 years since most African countries took their “indispensable first steps” toward liberalization and adopting competitive elections, the latest Freedom House reports indicate that recent setbacks have left only 12 percent of the continent free today.<sup>6</sup> Of Diamond’s collapsed democracies, 32 percent are in Africa, suggesting the continent contributes significantly to global trends of increasing authoritarianism.<sup>7</sup> Even Botswana, long considered a bulwark of democracy in Africa, has recently suffered government harassment of opposition candidates, interference with media reporting, and abuse of state resources during campaigning.<sup>8</sup>

The continued absence of democracy in many African countries, and the loss of democratic institutions in others, threatens continued instability and conflict in a region already rife with the problems generated by weak states. For US policymakers and AFRICOM to reverse this trend, a deeper understanding of Africa’s struggle to democratize is necessary. This article hopes to contribute to such an understanding by focusing on the role of African militaries in blocking or reversing democratization efforts. It then proposes a number of policy interventions that may help reform these institutions to be more compatible with democracy.

### **Political Tampering, Ethnic Armies, and Military Intervention against Democracies**

While many roads can lead to democratic reversals, from the gradual extension of executive power to the erosion of civil liberties that may accompany prolonged counterinsurgency efforts, direct military intervention has been an important contributor to this regretful outcome. When dissatisfied with democratic politics, militaries have prevented the implementation of free and fair elections, tampered with balloting, engaged in voter intimidation, overturned election results, and deposed

4 Carson, “US-Africa Policy Under the Obama Administration,” and Carter Ham, *Senate Armed Services Committee Statement of General Carter Ham, USA Commander, United States Africa Command*, March 7, 2013, 6, [www.africom.mil/Doc/10432](http://www.africom.mil/Doc/10432).

5 Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 144. See also Larry Diamond, “The Democratic Rollback,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 2 (March-April 2008).

6 Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 10; and Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2015,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015>.

7 Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” 145. See table “Breakdowns of Democracy, 2000-2014.”

8 Amy R. Poteete, “Botswana: Democracy Derailed? Botswana’s Fading Halo,” *AfricaPlus*, October 20, 2014, <https://africaplus.wordpress.com/2014/11/03/botswana-democracy-on-course-or-derailing>.

newly elected civilian leaders. Indeed, in Africa, coups have quickly followed nearly 40 percent of electoral transfers of power—when one leader peacefully hands over executive power to the next via the ballot box, a critical cornerstone of democratic politics.<sup>9</sup> Since 2010 alone, coups have been attempted against the elected civilian governments of Burundi (2015), Guinea (2011), Guinea-Bissau (2010 & 2012), Madagascar (2010), Mali (2012), Mauritania (2008), and Niger (2010). African militaries thus share much of the responsibility for Africa's difficulties in sustaining democratization. As Bratton and van de Walle have argued, where militaries have opposed democracy, liberalization has stalled or failed.<sup>10</sup>

Political tampering with military recruitment, retention, and promotion practices plays a crucial role in understanding why African militaries have been so predisposed to intervening against elected governments. First, most African countries have no tradition of insulating militaries from direct interference by the chief executive. Highly institutionalized and independent judicial and legislative branches of government are rare in fledgling democracies. So too are well developed and functioning ministries of defense that can provide legal-bureaucratic and impersonal civilian control over the military. Absent these institutions, few checks and balances exist on the ability of presidents to appoint and dismiss military officers based on their personal whims. When social conflict arises over controversial elections or other common problems of newly established democratic institutions, military officers whose political loyalty comes under question then face the real potential of dismissal or demotion. They may preempt this possibility, or take revenge in its aftermath, by intervening in politics: seizing power themselves or throwing their support behind the opposition.

The recent coup in Burundi is a case in point. In early 2015, President Pierre Nkurunziza sought advice from members of his inner circle on seeking a third term in office, including from Major General Godefroid Niyombare—an old ally, fellow former Hutu rebel fighter in Burundi's civil war, and recently named director of national intelligence. Niyombare expressed his concerns with violating the terms of the peace agreement and the constitution, which limit presidents to two terms, and advised Nkurunziza not to run again. He was then summarily dismissed as the national intelligence director (although he remained in the army). A few months later, mass social protests erupted after the president publicly indicated his intentions to run in the upcoming elections. Within weeks, on May 13, Niyombare resurfaced to lead a coup attempt against his former ally. Although the coup was quickly put down, it represents a significant failure of the extensive training by the United States and others to promote political neutrality within the Burundi military. Unchecked, personal control over high-level military appointments directly contributed to this re-politicization of the army.<sup>11</sup>

---

9 Kristen A. Harkness, "The Ethnic Army and the State: Explaining Coups Traps and the Difficulties of Democratization in Africa," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2014 Forthcoming): 17.

10 Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, 211-216.

11 David Blair, "Burundi Shares Ethnic Balance that Led to Rwanda Genocide—But This Conflict Is Different," *The Telegraph*, May 14, 2015; "Burundi: What Is Behind the Coup Bid?," *BBC*, May 15, 2015; Patrick Nduwimana and Goran Tomasevic, "President Returns to Burundi after Army Says Coup Bid Failed," *Reuters*, May 14, 2015; Morgan Winsor, "Who Is Godefroid Niyombare? Meet the Burundi Army General Who Declared a Coup to Oust President Pierre Nkurunziza," *International Business Times*, May 13, 2015.

Second, Africa is historically burdened by a particularly insidious form of political tampering: ethnically recruited military organizations that foster loyalty through shared identity, or ethnic armies.<sup>12</sup> This tradition began under colonialism. Colonial armies relied on racially white soldiers, largely drawn from the European metropole, to officer far-flung forces while recruiting natives into the rank-and-file. Martial race doctrine stipulated these local recruits should be drawn from politically reliable ethnic groups with great military prowess.<sup>13</sup> Groups like the Kalenjin in Kenya, the Acholi in Uganda, and the Mossi in Burkina Faso thus came to dominate their respective colonial militaries.<sup>14</sup>

Although decolonization brought opportunities for change, many African countries continued to build ethnic armies post-independence. The late 1950s and early 1960s was a period of great regional instability: Ghana suffered ethnically-based political party violence; Congo-Brazzaville experienced urban riots that fell along tribal lines; Rwanda saw deadly pogroms after the Hutu revolution unseated the Tutsi monarchy; Sudan erupted into civil war; and the Congo state completely collapsed after widespread army mutinies.<sup>15</sup> As insecurity spread, leaders searched for effective ways to ensure military loyalty, and many turned to the colonial model of recruiting politically loyal ethnic kin. Some such ethnic armies were built with the collusion of departing colonial powers, such as the Fulani/Peuhl dominated military of Cameroon and the Hutu based army of Rwanda.<sup>16</sup> Others were constructed through violent processes of purging, such as occurred in Sierra Leone until all groups except the Limba had been removed from both the police and armed forces.<sup>17</sup> Still others came about when ethnically based rebel forces captured central power, as the Tutsi dominated Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) did in 1994. In these ways, many contemporary African states inherited a tradition of ethnically based security institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Democracy deeply threatens such ethnic armies because elections may bring to power new leaders who no longer share in their identity. Africa is highly diverse, with the majority of countries boasting dozens if not hundreds of ethnic groups. Democratic elections thus carry with them a high likelihood that power will rotate between leaders of distinct ethnic backgrounds. Where new leaders inherit an ethnic army whose

12 Cynthia Enloe, "The Military Uses of Ethnicity," *Millennium* 4, no. 3 (Winter 1975): 220-233; Cynthia Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in Divided Societies* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980); Boubacar N'Diaye, *The Challenge of Institutionalizing Civilian Control: Botswana, Ivory Coast, and Kenya in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2001).

13 J. Bayo Adekson, "Ethnicity and Army Recruitment in Colonial Plural Societies," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 2 (April 1979): 154.

14 *Ibid.*, 160; and John Keegan, *World Armies* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1983), 598-600; Timothy Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the Kings African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999), 58.

15 Ali A. Mazrui and Michael Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1984), 59; Rene Gauze, *The Politics of Congo-Brazzaville* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), 65-66; Catherine Newbury, "Ethnicity and the Politics of History in Rwanda," *Africa Today* 45, no. 1 (January-March 1998): 13; and Crawford Young, *Politics in the Congo: Decolonization and Independence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 315-317.

16 Minorities at Risk Project, "Minorities at Risk Dataset," [http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/mar\\_data.asp](http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/mar_data.asp); and Patrick Lefèvre and Jean-Nöel Lefèvre, *Les Militaire Belge et le Rwanda, 1916-2006* (Brussels: Racine, 2006), 11-12.

17 Thomas S. Cox, *Civil Military Relations in Sierra Leone: A Case Study of African Soldiers in Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 106-107.

18 See also Enloe, "The Military Uses of Ethnicity," and Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in Divided Societies*.

identity is different than their own, they possess strong incentives to restructure that army: to either diversify it to more appropriately match the multiethnic character of their societies or to dismantle it and rebuild a new army of their coethnics in its place. Either type of restructuring threatens the existing ethnic army's exclusive access to an important source of state power, prestige, and patronage. To protect their privileged position, they may block democratization efforts from gaining traction, interfere with free and fair elections, overturn or otherwise invalidate results, or seize power before or after the new leader takes office.

Consider Guinea-Bissau, a small West African country whose instability and poverty have resulted in its transformation into a central hub of cocaine trafficking to Europe and heroin trafficking to the United States.<sup>19</sup> Protracted fighting with the Portuguese army for independence fractured Guinea-Bissau's ethnic groups, with the rebel army recruiting primarily from the Balanta while the Portuguese managed to keep the loyalty of the Fula and Mandinga. Rebel victory and the collapse of Portuguese colonialism in the mid-1970s thus led to the immediate establishment of a Balanta-dominated armed forces.<sup>20</sup> Early nationalist leaders attempted to restructure this army along more multiethnic lines, to no avail. Both the first and second administrations, led respectively by Presidents Luis Cabral and João Bernardo Vieira, faced numerous coup attempts from the Balanta military and were eventually deposed.<sup>21</sup> Despite an aborted turn toward democracy in the late 1990s, no government has yet been able to diversify the military.

In 2012, steps toward democratization were once again attempted—and quickly halted by the military. By this time, the Balanta-dominated army was thought to have become heavily invested in the drug trade, combining ethnic control over the security sector with access to millions of dollars in illicit trade.<sup>22</sup> The Presidential race had narrowed to a field of two candidates, Carlos Gomes and former president Kumba Yala, with a run-off election scheduled for late April. Gomes, the clear front runner and an ethnic outsider to the military (Yala shares Balanta ethnicity), then publicly expressed his intentions of reforming the armed forces. Claiming that Gomes had signed a secret document authorizing foreign intervention to restructure the military, army officers seized power and cancelled the election.<sup>23</sup> While they eventually handed power back over to civilians in 2014, no president in Guinea Bissau has yet served his full term. Were the current government to challenge the military or attempt reform, it would likely be overthrown as well.

Guinea-Bissau is not unique in confronting the challenges of building democratic institutions while encountering the resistance of ethnically based security institutions. Ethnic armies have existed in slightly under half of all electoral power transfers in Africa and, when confronted with a new leader of a different ethnic identity, have overturned those

---

19 Raggie Johansen, "Guinea-Bissau: A New Hub for Cocaine Trafficking," *Perspectives* 5 (May 2008): 4-7; and Ed Vulliamy, "How a Tiny West African Country Became the World's First Narco-State," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2008.

20 Keegan, *World Armies*, 239-240.

21 Patrick Chabal, *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 251-258.

22 Vulliamy, "How a Tiny West African Country Became the World's First Narco-State."

23 "Guinea-Bissau's Coup: Besieged in Bissau," *The Economist*, April 17, 2012; and "Gunfire Heard' in Guinea-Bissau Capital," *BBC*, April 12, 2012.

elections by seizing power fully 75 percent of the time.<sup>24</sup> For example, in Nigeria, the northern Hausa/Fulani had long dominated the officer corps during the country's many years of military rule. Early democratization efforts came to a stand still when, in 1993, the military annulled election results that would have placed Moshood Abiola, a southern Yoruba, in the presidency.<sup>25</sup> Elections were not held again for another six years while the military continued to govern. In Cameroon, independence era leader Ahmadou Ahidjo, with French collaboration, built a northern Fulani/Peuhl dominated military.<sup>26</sup> After Ahidjo's retirement, Paul Biya, a Christian southerner and ethnic Bulu, won election to the presidency. He then immediately announced plans to transfer Fulani/Peuhl soldiers out of the elite Presidential Guard, sparking a coup attempt.<sup>27</sup> Biya survived the coup and, in its aftermath, restructured the military around his own ethnic group—a situation that remains of grave concern today.<sup>28</sup> Kenya too has a history of its presidents stacking military institutions with coethnics: the Kikuyu dominated the army under Jomo Kenyatta and the Kalenjin under Daniel arap Moi. Indeed, Moi's restructuring led to Kenya's only coup attempt orchestrated by disenfranchised Kikuyu officers.<sup>29</sup> After Mwai Kibaki came to power in 2002, he once again purged the higher ranks of the security services, replacing Kalenjin officers with mostly those of the Kikuyu and closely related Embu and Meru ethnic groups.<sup>30</sup> While the military refrained from intervention during this particular transition, the danger remains that the future election of a non-Kikuyu would severely test the political neutrality of the Kenya Defense Forces.

The presence of ethnically recruited military organizations may also have more subtle, yet still insidious, effects on young democracies. Possessing an ethnically narrow army loyal through ties of ethnic affinity and patronage may embolden state leaders to disregard the desires and rights of much of their population. They may ignore legislative laws and judicial rulings, intimidate voters from different ethnic groups, and otherwise expand their power beyond constitutional limits. Whether direct or indirect, these effects are pernicious for democracy.

Additionally, leaders of fragile democracies facing social unrest may be tempted to undo past restructuring and, using their ability to politically tamper with military recruitment, return to historical precedents of ensuring loyalty through ethnicity. Since the 1990s, peace agreements and constitutional reforms have diversified many of Africa's militaries,

---

24 Harkness, "The Ethnic Army and the State: Explaining Coups Traps and the Difficulties of Democratization in Africa," 18.

25 Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, 216.

26 Minorities at Risk Project, "Minorities at Risk Dataset."

27 "Attempted Coup—Political Changes—Budget," *Keesings World New Archive* 30 (September 1984): 33075.

28 Minorities at Risk Project, "Minorities at Risk Dataset."

29 N'Diaye, *The Challenge of Institutionalizing Civilian Control*, 123-131.

30 Charles Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 712-713.

including in Benin, Sierra Leone, and South Africa.<sup>31</sup> Attempts to dismantle these ethnically diverse armies could once again motivate targeted soldiers to defend themselves by intervening in politics. Such is the fear at this very moment in Burundi. Under the peace agreement that ended Burundi's civil war, the army was split equally between Hutu and Tutsi soldiers, creating a diverse army. Yet, ethnic divisions remained, with former Hutu rebels largely politically aligned with the ruling party and former Tutsi soldiers of the old state army sympathizing with the opposition. Although the May coup attempt was not itself ethnically motivated—it was led by a Hutu, against a Hutu president, and put down by loyalists under the Hutu army chief of staff—Nkurunziza's reaction to the coup has nonetheless disproportionately targeted Tutsi soldiers (possibly due to their suspected political loyalties). Many officers now fear that the army is being purged along ethnic lines, with hundreds arrested already. This threat may inspire Tutsi soldiers, who have so far remained aloof from the country's political turmoil, to abandon their neutrality. If that happens, and the military splits violently along ethnic lines, a far worse conflict could erupt.<sup>32</sup>

### Assisting Reform

For many African countries, military reform is thus necessary to achieve stable democratic institutions over the long-term. Militaries must be insulated from political tampering, whether personally or ethnically motivated. Existing ethnic armies must also be restructured such that soldiers are no longer recruited and promoted based on their ethnic identity. Only then can power be safely transferred between elected leaders without the constant danger of military intervention. Nationally representative armies may also assist in better constraining chief executives within their constitutional limits, thus averting other forms of autocratic regression.

What is needed is the proliferation and entrenchment of merit-based military institutions. Once well established, systems of merit-based recruitment and promotion insulate soldiers from purges, demotions, and other negative outcomes due to their ethnic identity or political leanings. Soldiers then have less reason to fear personal consequences resulting from social unrest or democratic rotations of power, thereby lessening military resistance to democratization and increasing their political neutrality.

The United States and other international actors can assist with such reform in three key ways. First, reform can threaten existing armies and destabilize regimes in the short term. The on-the-ground presence of neutral foreign troops or advisors can dampen fears, ensure fairness, and even shield struggling civilian governments from coup attempts

---

<sup>31</sup> See, respectively, William J. Foltz and Steve McDonald, eds., *Democratization in Africa: The Role of the Military (Report on the Second Regional Conference)* (Cotonou, Benin: The African-American Institute, 1995); Osman Gbla, "Security Sector Reform under International Tutelage in Sierra Leone," *International Peacekeeping* 13, no. 1 (March 2006): 83; and Gavin Cawthra, "Security Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," in Gavin Cawthra and Robin Luckham, eds., *Governing Insecurity: Democratic Control of Military and Security Establishments in Transitional Democracies* (London: Zed Books, 2003), 32-38.

<sup>32</sup> "Burundi Crisis Spreads Outside the Capital; Army 'Purge' Underway Following Failed Coup," *Mail and Guardian*, June 6, 2015; and "Burundi: What Is Behind the Coup Bid?" *BBC*, May 15, 2015.



during restructuring. Second, security sector reform programs and military-to-military exchange and training programs can offer direct assistance in developing and implementing merit-based recruitment and promotion systems. Finally, financial incentives could be used to reward African governments for maintaining such systems. Of course, these measures are no panacea and cannot substitute for a domestic willingness to grapple with reform. But we can reward, assist, and even protect those African governments who are trying to build a better democratic future for their country.

### *Protective Boots on the Ground*

Dismantling existing patronage networks, ethnic or otherwise, within the military directly threatens officers with the capacity to violently halt reform efforts. Soldiers may fear they will be unable to meet meritocratic standards. Or they may fear democratic reforms merely provide a palatable cover for displacing current officers in favor of another political or ethnic network. In either case, the existing army may resist restructuring, creating the very instability such reform ultimately seeks to prevent.

AFRICOM, working with other regional and international actors, could play a pivotal role in helping governments to overcome these short-term challenges and implement reforms by putting boots on the ground. The most precarious period of restructuring is the initial transition from ethnic (or political) loyalty to meritocratic recruitment and promotion policies. During this time, fears may run high as new systems quickly replace old practices and previously excluded groups have entered the military in significant but small numbers, posing a threat to the existing dominant group but still easily sidelined or purged. The presence of ground troops or military advisors can dampen fears and shield civilian governments as this initial restructuring takes place. Just as in the aftermath of civil wars, foreign personnel are neutral to existing conflicts and can pass reliable information to all sides about compliance with regulations, rumored troop movements, and other indicators of defection from, or cooperation with, the new system. They can thus reduce fear and uncertainty and prevent accidents from spiraling out of control.<sup>33</sup> Foreign troops or advisors can also act as early warning systems for coup plots by monitoring military movements, thereby discouraging hardliners from violent resistance to reforms. Such monitoring takes away from any planned attack the elements of stealth and surprise—which are crucial to successful coup attempts.

Yet, sending significant numbers of military personnel in support of reform, even advisors, would encounter serious obstacles. Placing troops on the ground relies on both the willingness of the host country to accept foreign military personnel, and the willingness of external actors to supply them. In the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has been hesitant to put boots on the ground, even in small numbers—although sending advisors may be a more palatable option. Even AFRICOM's ability to send advising and training personnel is limited. Under the Army's Regionally Aligned Force (RAF)

---

33 For a discussion of peacekeepers as neutral forces in the aftermath of civil wars, see Virginia Paige Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work?: Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 93-98.

concept, a brigade has been attached to AFRICOM since 2013. Teams can be deployed in support of training missions, but they are generally short missions involving small numbers of personnel.<sup>34</sup> Equally important, the African Union has long emphasized finding “African solutions to African problems” and the common stance of the vast majority of African countries is to discourage hosting foreign troops. Stationing combat troops, or even large advising teams, on African soil could thus seriously damage perceptions of, and support for, AFRICOM.<sup>35</sup> Whether small advising teams could deter or prevent determined military opposition to reform remains an open question.

### *Training in Support of Merit*

Even where reforming democracies cannot be directly protected, training assistance is still vital to their success. For countries that have long operated by other norms, creating and maintaining systems of merit based recruitment and promotion is neither intuitive nor easy. To ensure that officer recruitment and promotions are based on merit rather than political or ethnic loyalty, military academies and advanced staff colleges may need to be established, restructured, expanded, or their curricula overhauled, to tie advancement in the ranks to continuing education. Decisions must be made over the qualities and achievements militaries seek to reward for each rank and career track and then performance indicators, promotion criteria, pay scales, entrance and advancement tests, and other incentives designed on that basis. And both civilian and military personnel must be trained to administer and continually improve such systems. Well versed in these procedures, the US military can offer critical assistance to fledgling democracies in the process of building them.

The United States could tie such training into existing programs. First, AFRICOM, working with the State Department, is currently extensively involved in training partner nations to enhance their own long-term ability to provide security. The Africa Contingency Operations and Training Assistance (ACOTA) program, part of the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), has already partnered with 25 African countries to train over 77,000 African peacekeepers. In the last few years, the program has shifted away from direct training and toward enhancing local training infrastructures.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Operation Juniper Shield has trained company-sized forces from 10 African nations in the trans-Sahel to increase border security and counter the illicit flow of people, goods, and arms across the region.<sup>37</sup> These existing advisory teams could assist in expanding military education programs to prepare soldiers for merit-based promotion protocols and help develop performance indicators and promotion criteria while deployed on missions. Second, International Military Education Training (IMET) and Expanded International Military Education Training (E-IMET) programs already focus on human rights, military professionalization,

---

34 David E. Brown, *AFRICOM at 5 Years: The Maturation of a New US Combatant Command* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2013), 77-78.

35 Ibid., 57, 62; and Gorm Rye Olsen, “Fighting Terrorism in Africa by Proxy: The USA and the European Union in Somalia and Mali,” *European Security* 23, no. 3 (2014): 291.

36 US Department of State, “Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI),” <http://www.state.gov/t/pm/ppa/gpoi>.

37 Brown, *AFRICOM at 5 Years*, 34.

understanding civilian control of the military, and judicial reform.<sup>38</sup> Building merit-based systems seems a natural extension to this important work. Finally, AFRICOM has also participated in Security Sector Reform programs that involve more extensive restructuring of security forces, especially after civil wars. Operation Onward Liberty, for example, saw 50-60 uniformed military advisors sent to Liberia to assist with reform.<sup>39</sup> In such cases, a rare opportunity exists to rebuild the defense sector almost from the ground-up and measures that promote merit could be folded into existing security sector reform efforts.

Increasing the US training role during military reform efforts would, moreover, align well with existing strategy in the region. AFRICOM's priority is to "lead from behind": building partner capacity and preventing conflict while enabling African nations to solve their own security concerns.<sup>40</sup> Increased military-to-military exchanges would hopefully strengthen partnerships between US and African forces while creating more robust and stable local military institutions and civil-military relations over the long-term.

### *Financial Incentives*

Finally, external actors can develop financial incentives that reward African countries for establishing merit based recruitment and promotion systems and dissuade their dismantlement. Military aid, or broader forms of development aid, can be tied directly to maintaining meritocratic and politically neutral security institutions. Of course, the United States gives military aid for a variety of reasons—including for counterterrorism, counter narcotics, and other strategic purposes—and thus may not wish to tie much of its aid package to merit-based restructuring. Even bonus funds, however, for steps taken in the right direction might still make a difference, especially given the cash-strapped nature of many African states. Beyond aid, other types of rewards could include additional spaces in military education and exchange programs, priority for assignment to regional and international peacekeeping operations, and higher pay rates for participation in them. Such financial and prestige rewards would encourage governments to begin reform efforts and make it costly for them to tamper with merit-based systems in the future.

Reliance on financial incentives does have its limitations. Threatening to withhold aid or other rewards may be largely ineffective if the threat itself is not credible. Militaries in strategically important countries, like Egypt, know that the United States is unlikely to significantly cut their aid. Even where aid is withheld, it can be replaced by other actors, such as China and Russia, with less conditionality. Making participation in peacekeeping operations contingent on any reform criteria would be difficult. Current African peacekeeping missions rely heavily on contingents from autocratic and semi-autocratic countries because very few African nations are both democratic and willing to contribute troops.<sup>41</sup> Such supply deficiencies preclude placing conditions on those willing to participate. Finally, regimes may simply value ethnically or politically

---

38 *Ibid.*, 36.

39 *Ibid.*, 35.

40 *Ibid.*, 15.

41 *Ibid.*, 80-81.

loyal militaries more than the cost of losing any rewards offered for maintaining merit-based institutions.

Indeed, current policies of suspending development aid, as well as membership in regional organizations, in the wake of coups have shown meager results.<sup>42</sup> Militaries in countries such as Guinea-Bissau and Niger frequently seize power, resulting in the suspension of aid, then schedule elections and retreat to the barracks. The international community quickly restores aid, and when elections fail to go their way or other domestic turmoil strikes, the same militaries intervene again.<sup>43</sup> Suspending aid in the wake of coups, given its quick restoration after a transition back to civilian rule, thus seems to discourage militaries from governing but not from intervening in politics.

Nonetheless, financial rewards cannot hurt and they may marginally shift the incentives facing local civilian and military actors such that they support and maintain reforms.

## Conclusion

Military intervention has been a key stumbling block preventing democratic consolidation in Africa. Political tampering by African leaders with military recruitment, retention, and promotion practices fuels such intervention. Political tampering has motivated officers to abandon their neutrality and forestall the consolidation of fledgling democracies. Africa's legacy of ethnically recruited militaries has also been a pernicious destabilizing force. Africa's diversity means that elections will bring to power leaders who no longer share the identity of historically constructed ethnic armies. Threatened with restructuring and diversification, these ethnic armies may act drastically to avoid losing their privileged access to an important source of state power and patronage; they have halted elections, engaged in voter intimidation and ballot fraud, annulled results, and overthrown the government.

Deepening democracy in many African countries thus requires dismantling established ethnic armies, reforming militaries along meritocratic lines, and insulating them from political tampering. Not only is such restructuring normatively desirable in meeting standards of justice wherein every citizen, regardless of their ethnic identity, should be able to serve their country with honor, but it is essential for truly democratic politics. Elected state leaders should hail from any and all social groups—without destabilizing the state.

---

42 International organizations, such as the World Bank, regional organizations, and individual countries have all practiced suspending aid and diplomatic relations after military coups. The United States is required to suspend aid under the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, as they have done in cases like Mali, as well as to cease any security assistance to a military that has seized power (Ham, *Senate Armed Services Committee Statement*, 10; and Monika Mark, "US Suspends Mali's Military Aid After Coup," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2012). The European Union considers cases on an individual basis but has at least partially suspended aid and cooperation in the past (Mark Anderson, "EU Restores Ties with Guinea-Bissau Five Years After Coup," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2015). And the African Union censures members, suspends their membership, and even applies sanctions after coups (see Jonathan M. Powell and Trace C. Lasley, "Constitutional Norms and the Decline of the Coup d'état: An Empirical Assessment," Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association (New Orleans, LA, January 12, 2012).

43 See, for example, "US and France Suspend Aid After Military Coup in Niger," *The New York Times*, January 29, 1996; and Scott Stearns, "World Bank Restores Aid to Niger Following February Coup," *Voice of America*, May 19, 2010.

Diversifying African militaries may have several other beneficial effects. First, if reliance on an ethnically narrow army emboldens leaders to engage in repressive behavior they might otherwise think twice about—from intimidating opposition parties and other ethnic groups to ignoring legislation and judicial rulings—then decreasing that reliance may force leaders to moderate their behavior. Second, practices of ethnic exclusion are known to feed rebellion and ethnic insurgencies. Improving Africa's record of ethnic inclusion in a critical state institution could have long-term ameliorative effects on instability in the region.

Yet, the necessary reforms toward merit-based military institutions will likely exacerbate the very problem they seek to solve. Ethnic armies are unlikely to acquiesce quietly to their own dismantling. This is where the United States and its allies can play a vital role in assisting and even protecting reform-minded governments. Troops or advisors on the ground can provide neutral information on compliance and deter coup attempts through monitoring. Training assistance can help governments with the practicalities of establishing and maintaining merit-based recruitment and promotion systems. And financial incentives can be structured to discourage eroding the new systems. For example, military or development aid, places in military-to-military exchange programs, and bonus pay for peacekeepers could be tied to maintaining merit-centered security forces.

These measures can not provide a panacea for domestic problems and they cannot overcome stiff resistance from leaders long accustomed to recruiting their militaries from amongst their own coethnics or otherwise politically tampering with the army. Moreover, even if established, protecting merit-based recruitment and promotion systems over time will be an even more difficult challenge. Indeed, the long-term entrenchment of merit-based military institutions relies on reforms in other areas of governance. The rule of law and the development of legislative and judicial constraints on executive power are both necessary to prevent presidents facing insecure environments, and the potential of divisive internal conflict, from tampering with merit-based militaries and returning to well-established practices of building security institutions around political or ethnic loyalty. International assistance and incentives to continue moving in the right direction can help, but success will ultimately rest on a general evolution of domestic political practices toward democracy, the rule of law, and civilian control over the military. This is a struggle that must, in the end, be fought domestically—but we can and should protect and reward reformers.