

HISTORY MATTERS

A Return to Khaki Rule? Democracy and Africa's Lost History of Military Government

Gregory Mann 

Columbia University
Email: gm522@columbia.edu

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Abstract

Much of West Africa (and particularly the Sahel) may be once falling again under military government. This essay asks what, if anything, historians of Africa can contribute to an understanding of this phenomenon. I argue that writing the history and understanding the memory of military government will entail a renewed approach to political history and social theory. It will also entail confronting — just as so many citizens are currently doing — the peculiar failures of democracy in Africa's neoliberal era.

Keywords: West Africa; Mali; Nigeria; Niger; Burkina Faso; Ghana; military; governance; state; postcolonial; democracy

Whether or not millions of African citizens prefer military to civilian rule — and data says they do not¹ — it may be their future. It was not supposed to be this way. Some thirty years ago, at the end of the Cold War, much of the African continent experienced what was widely hailed as a wave of democratization. In the decades following — in the wake of a strong dose of neoliberal reforms, significant external funding for the building of democratic institutions, and an unprecedented growth in civil society and non-governmental organizations — African thinkers proclaimed a “Renaissance.” More prosaically, an “Africa rising” narrative foresaw a steady growth in African GDPs and predicted a bright democratic future. Recent developments on the continent suggest that such prognoses — linking market liberalization to durable democratization — may have been too rosy. Since 2020, military officers have seized power in Guinea, Chad, Sudan, and Mali (for the third time in a decade). Burkina Faso has joined this list, twice over, while — having played a role in frustrating previous attempts at staging coups d'état — senior military officers in Gabon and Niger seized power for themselves in mid-2023. In short, much of West Africa (and particularly the Sahel) may be once falling again under military government, or what we might call, following Paul Nugent, “Khaki Rule.”² What, if anything, can historians of Africa contribute to an understanding of these phenomena?

First, we can recognize that the current situation is a reversal nearly as dramatic as the one Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily observed in the early 1990s. As they wrote in their introduction to *The Military and Militarism in Africa*, between the time when they first began to study the topic in 1988 and their first conference in 1991, the tide seemed to be going out on a generation of military

¹Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi, Carolyn Logan, and Josephine Sanny, “Africans’ Durable Demand for Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 136–51.

²Paul Nugent, “Khaki Fatigue,” in *Africa since Independence: A Comparative History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 207–63. By “military government” I refer to those emergent from armies rather than guerilla or liberation movements.



rulers.³ National conferences, constitutional conventions, democratic transitions, and multi-party elections rapidly succeeded one another, and Hutchful and Bathily found themselves in “an open-ended state of transition between the crisis of authoritarianism and the prospect of democracy.”⁴ It is important to remember how sharp a break this was, from stagnation to transition, from insurrections to elections. A generation later, we may be in the inverse situation, caught between a crisis of democracy (obviously not only in Africa) and the prospect of authoritarianism — in this case, a specifically military authoritarianism. In the Sahel in particular, this dramatic shift cannot be disentangled from the security crisis that has bedeviled the region for over a decade. That soldiers seize power first and foremost to address grievances in their collective, working lives is both well established in the literature and evident empirically.⁵ Still, popular perceptions of military government — the enchantment of strong-man rule, the disillusion with democracy, the longing for a bygone social order — clearly have deeper, more complex, and more endogenous roots. Among them number the failure of democratic governments not only to effect and sustain the broad move to prosperity observers less sanguine than Hutchful and Bathily saw in the offing, but above all — particularly in the Sahel — to assure a minimum of human security.

Whatever is happening, it is surely more complex than what political scientists have dubbed “democratic backsliding.”⁶ The term merits our attention. To an American ear, the phrase “backsliding” calls to mind Southern Baptist or evangelical Christianity. It implies that one has strayed from the straight path, from the true faith — in this case, the civic religion of liberal democracy — as if any given African state might wake late of a Sunday morning with a wooden tongue, a heavy head, and dim memories of a juke joint. Surely the straight path implied by the phrase represents a narrower line than a nuanced social analysis would require. Historians in particular ought to be able to identify where and how people in the past broke, blazed, joined, or left that path for another. Indeed, as sober and prescient a thinker as the late Claude Ake saw a fork in the road that should figure on every map of Africa’s recent past. As early as 1993, Ake warned his readers that if African democracy enshrined “abstract political rights” over and above “concrete economic rights” — extending to redistribution — the result would be a “democracy of alienation.”⁷ Is this what came to pass over the succeeding decades? In states in which democratic systems have witnessed the erosion of popular legitimacy by failing to improve the economic prospects of their citizens, perhaps so. Meanwhile, contemporary Africa’s “developmental authoritarians” and more than one of its “warlord democrats” have taken the alternate path.⁸ They have privileged the pursuit of quantifiable economic growth over stubbornly unquantifiable civic rights, and their regimes would seem to be more attentive to the metrics of GNP and GDP per capita than to their Polity score, their place in the Freedom House index, or other proxy measures of democratic practice and liberal

³Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily, eds., *The Military and Militarism in Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1998).

⁴Pearl T. Robinson, “The National Conference Phenomenon in Francophone Africa,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 3 (1994): 575–610; Hutchful and Bathily, *The Military and Militarism*, ii. During the period in question, Nigeria and the Gambia offered clear counter-examples: Boubacar N’Diaye, Abdoulaye Saine, and Mathurin Houngnikpo, *Not Yet Democracy: West Africa’s Slow Farewell to Authoritarianism* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005).

⁵Maggie Dwyer, *Soldiers in Revolt: Army Mutinies in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2017); Jimmy D. Kandeh, *Coups from Below: Armed Subalterns and State Power in West Africa* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

⁶Sebastian Elischer, “Editors’ Introduction: Reassessing Africa’s New Post-Coup Landscape,” *African Studies Review* 65, no. 1 (2022): 1–7; Leonardo R. Arriola, Lise Rakner, and Nicolas Van De Walle, eds., *Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁷Claude Ake, “The Unique Case of African Democracy,” *International Affairs* 69, no. 2 (1993): 241, 244. For a comparable prognosis, see Thandika Mkandawire, “Crisis Management and the Making of ‘Choiceless Democracies,’” in *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa*, ed. Richard Joseph (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 119–44.

⁸Anders Themnér, ed., *Warlord Democrats in Africa: Ex-Military Leaders and Electoral Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2017); Hilary Matfess, “Rwanda and Ethiopia: Developmental Authoritarianism and the New Politics of African Strong Men,” *African Studies Review* 58, no. 2 (2015): 181–204.

statecraft.⁹ This is precisely the inverse of what Harri Englund termed “freedom to starve,” but it is hardly freedom at all; for Englund, it raises enduring questions on the possibility of participatory government and the place of liberalism in postcolonial contexts.¹⁰ Developmental authoritarians may successfully avoid confronting the deeper, conceptual challenge Ake posed — how to foster a properly African democracy — but intellectuals cannot.

In the decades since Ake delivered his warning, scholars of African societies have developed compelling lines of analysis for understanding social and political life on the continent. However, these remain essentially predicated on neoliberalism and its effects, on an unequal but real form of participation in shared structures of global governance and civil society, and in many cases, on the practice of flawed but functioning democracies.¹¹ Such analyses implicitly factor in civilian rule with its distinct temporalities (election cycles and term limits, for example), its need for broad domestic alliances (such as with trade unions, civil society associations, or coalition partners), and its forms of external engagement (within regional associations like ECOWAS, within the African Union, or beyond the continent). If they have summoned scholars to rethink liberalism — democracy’s premise — on the continent, they have often done so by focusing on one of its two key foundational concepts: the boundary between public and private, which has proven notoriously unstable and difficult to trace.¹² They have generally neglected if not entirely foreclosed the second concept, that of the equal and autonomous individual participating freely in collective life. In the present moment, that concept may demand renewed attention. Achille Mbembe’s work is emblematic of this conceptual challenge. As a general theory of postcolonial governance, Mbembe’s classic essay “Of Commandement” recognizes the origins of a contemporary, coercive culture of rule — and, crucially, the practices of citizenship that accompany it — in the colonial administrative-military apparatus.¹³ This is a rather straight line, equivalent in its own way to other interpretations of the postcolonial state that find its origins largely in its predecessor.¹⁴ Such historicist analyses, like Mbembe’s own line of argument, underestimate the innovation of specifically militarized forms of African statecraft, eliding the difference not only between individual states and regimes of governmentality, but also between different forms and practices of government, and amongst means of participation, evasion, and contestation.¹⁵

⁹Nic Cheeseman and Jonathon Fisher, *Authoritarian Africa: Repression, Resistance, and the Power of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 96.

¹⁰Harri Englund, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹¹See, e.g., Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia*, trans. Drew Burk and Sarah Jones-Boardman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, trans. A. M. Berrett et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Gaurav Gajanan Desai and Adeline Marie Masquelier, eds., *Critical Terms for the Study of Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018); and Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

¹²Beatrice Hibou, Boris Samuel, and Laurent Fourchard, *The Spirits of Neoliberal Reforms and Everyday Politics of the State in Africa* (Dakar: Amalio, 2017); Achille Mbembe, “On Private Indirect Government,” in Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 66–101; James Ferguson, “Demoralizing Economies,” in Ferguson, *Global Shadows*; Steven Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). The classic formulation is Peter Ekeh, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 1 (1975): 91–112.

¹³Mbembe, “Of Commandement,” in Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 24–65.

¹⁴Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹⁵Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*; Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

A broader theory of African politics, informed by contemporary history, would need more nuance, moving beyond both the legacies of the colonial state and the premise that episodes of military government in Africa are anomalous rather than constitutive.¹⁶ After all, military governments have had durable, even foundational, effects on their civilian successors. In some cases, they have sought to set sharp limits on the nature, tactics, and boundaries of political engagement, creating decades-long patterns for oppositional politics.¹⁷ In others, their words and actions have changed not only the profile and political orientation of the state, but the meaning of government itself. Thus, even if it has come to be associated with the period of neoliberal democracy, the particular form of non-governmentality that has until recently characterized contemporary statecraft in the Sahel and beyond first emerged under conditions specific to military rule.¹⁸ Those conditions — attributes of military government — could include: closed circuits of decision-making, producing seemingly arbitrary actions; minimal capacity to generate consent, short of either corruption or coercion;¹⁹ a manifest intolerance of criticism and outside commentary, whether from activists, diplomats, or even their political allies; a counterintuitive willingness either to cede to external actors or, in the case of a “coup from the Left,” to internally redefine specific elements of the social welfare state;²⁰ a willingness to adopt and impose more radical programs than their civilian counterparts, such that — historically, and curiously — socialist regimes have been civilian and Marxist ones military;²¹ and relative international isolation.

The latter characteristic — or, put differently, the forms of external engagement available to military regimes — has changed dramatically over time. “When I started this struggle [against oil drilling in Ogoni land], I did not know that it might lead to my death,” Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote to his son from prison in 1994.²² Soon enough, it did. Saro-Wiwa’s cause had won global attention, but, with the support of multinational oil companies, General Sani Abacha, then Nigeria’s head of state, had little reason to care. In executing the author of *Sozaboy*, Abacha both reminded his fellow citizens of the limits of political contest under military rule and demonstrated his indifference to world opinion. Few could forget such a lesson, yet it was also specific to a place and time. In the contemporary scenario, the African Union, regional bodies like ECOWAS, and the United States have all adopted policies that sharply limit their own capacity to engage with governments emerging from an extra-constitutional seizure of power.²³ Thus while the border between a military government and an authoritarian civilian one may be blurred, the greatest distinction between them may lie in the forms of extraversion that they enable or preclude.²⁴ Civilian governments reliant on their roles

¹⁶Political scientists, too, tend to see the phenomenon as an aberration. See Dwyer, *Soldiers in Revolt*; Elischer, “Editors’ Introduction;” cf. Christopher Day and Moses Khisa, “Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in Africa,” in *Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in Africa: Beyond the Coup d’Etat*, eds. Christopher Day and Moses Khisa (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2022).

¹⁷Rebecca Glade, “Sudanese Political Movements and the Struggle for the State, 1964–1985” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2023).

¹⁸Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁹Ellis, *This Present Darkness*.

²⁰Thomas Zuber, “‘We Cultivate to Redistribute’: Child-Rearing, Rural Development and the Politics of Redistribution in Twentieth Century Burkina Faso” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2023).

²¹Nugent, “Khaki Fatigue,” 243.

²²Ken Saro-Wiwa, “Letter from prison by Ken Saro-Wiwa to Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr., 4 July 1994,” accessed 27 Sep. 2023, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/ken-saro-wiwa-letter>.

²³Day and Khisa, *Rethinking*, 10; Francis Nguendi Ikome, *Good Coups and Bad Coups: The Limits of the African Union’s Injunction on Unconstitutional Changes of Power in Africa* (Johannesburg: Institute for Global Dialogue, 2007); Alexis Arieff and Lauren Ploch Blanchard, “An Epidemic of Coups in Africa? Issues for Congress,” 11 Feb. 2022, <https://csrreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11854/2>; and Alexis Arieff and Nick M. Brown, “Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Relations,” 12 Dec. 2023, <https://csrreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11267>.

²⁴Jean-François Bayart, “Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion,” *African Affairs* 99, no. 395 (2000): 217–67; also published as Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), preface.

as brokers between the instances of global governance and their citizenry stand in sharp contrast to the isolated and often ostracized governments that successful coups produce. In decades past, soldiers who overthrew civilians were often depicted as agents of a repressive international order.²⁵ They may now be viewed — and present themselves — in precisely the opposite fashion, as rebels against just such a system, one which in turn makes little room for them. The result is two-fold: other international partners come to the fore, resuscitating often long-dormant relationships; and the euphemism of the “transitional government” takes hold, allowing foreign diplomats to pivot gradually from consternation to cooperation in dealing with military governments. The historical practice of extraversion may continue, but with different players and heightened stakes.

Such relative and contingent diplomatic isolation, coupled with a diminishing space for civil society associations and the masculinization of public space that coups d'état produce, may restrict women's political lives in particular. For while soldiers' exercise of political power has been a largely masculine affair, the experience of military rule has proven profoundly gendered in more complicated ways. In Uganda, Guinea, or Ghana, military government exposed both men and women to particularly gendered forms of trauma.²⁶ Conversely, in Nigeria of the 1980s and '90s, military governments largely succeeded in coopting the rhetoric of women's movements to build their own base of support.²⁷ Across the continent in more recent decades, a particular form of gendered non-governmentality has flourished under democratic and civilian administrations. Such movements are undoubtedly more resilient and autonomous than they once were, but how well and for how long they can weather a period of diplomatic isolation under military government remains an open question.

If we reason from the dual premise that military government is a distinct form of statecraft, and that students of contemporary Africa ought to have something to say about it, the question becomes what can historians specifically bring to this discussion? As a group, we have generally been slow to confront the history of military government, its shadow over the present, and its significance for the future.²⁸ The study of Africa's socialist states has attracted a rich body of work, leaving the — often much-longer — period of military government and its aftermath largely immune from historical scrutiny. This is both commonsensical and curious. On the one hand, in the wake of neoliberalism generally — and structural adjustment specifically — the possibilities of African socialism stood to be reclaimed.²⁹ On the other hand, coups d'état and military government are built into contemporary African history and politics as either the origin story or the denouement of iconic leaders — if Lumumba, Nkrumah, and Keita come to mind, so should Mobutu, Eyadéma, and Amin. Moreover the conceptual bundle of military government lends itself to historical analysis. There are in fact two related phenomena at work: the seizure of power, usually in a coup d'état, an event by definition limited in time; and the actual exercise of political power, which takes place over an unbounded (if often hotly negotiated) period euphemistically dubbed a transition. Academic historians' counterintuitive aversion to the study of events, in favor of the study of trends and processes, may stand them in good stead here, for the performative *mise en scène* and the

²⁵Ruth First, *The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'état* (London: Allen Lane, 1970).

²⁶Alicia C. Decker, *In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014); Ben Twagira, “The Men Have Come’: Gender and Militarisation in Kampala, 1966-86,” *Gender & History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 813–32; Abena Ampofoa Asare, *Truth without Reconciliation: A Human Rights History of Ghana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

²⁷Amina Mama, “Khaki in the Family: Gender Discourses and Militarism in Nigeria,” *African Studies Review* 41, no. 2 (1998): 1–17.

²⁸Exceptions include Nugent, “Khaki Fatigue,” and Samuel Fury Childs Daly, “The Portable Coup: The Jurisprudence of ‘Revolution’ in Uganda and Nigeria,” *Law and History Review* 39, no. 4 (2021): 737–64.

²⁹Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ferguson, “Demoralizing Economies.” Notably each focuses on states to date immune from military rule.

distinct temporalities of coups d'état may prove less instructive than an understanding of the durable — and dynamic — legacies of military governments.³⁰

When historians have written on African militaries, they have generally eschewed study of their political for their social history.³¹ Thirty years ago, Myron Echenberg summoned historians to consider soldiers as workers in search of a wage rather than as “watchdogs” of empire.³² That perspective may stand to be reversed, or at least revisited. Men and women in uniform are also, and have long been, subjects or citizens. Yet historical studies of postcolonial Africa that understand soldiers as political actors — which they indubitably are — prove to be rare, and histories of military regimes are rarer still.³³ It may be that such histories will always be few in number. Military regimes have tended to be taciturn and (until recently) unaccountable. The exceptions that prove the rule — captained by garrulous young men like Thomas Sankara and Jerry Rawlings — engaged in vast campaigns of civic education; they needed the support of their fellow citizens to pursue their populist agendas. Many officers prefer simply to give orders while maintaining a strategic opacity regarding the actual functioning of the government. One can imagine, therefore, that contemporary internal sources for the historical analysis of military regimes will be comparatively thin. Yet, memory — particularly as marshalled in the form of transitional justice — can produce history, too. For instance, by focusing on the victims of their violence, Abena Ampofo Asare offered something like a photographic negative of Ghana's military regimes.³⁴ Her study is neither a prosecutorial text nor a history of any particular regime itself, but it reveals what they concealed. By contrast, if military regimes have, for the most part, tended to avoid the spotlight, rebel groups crave it. This may explain why the literature on insurgents, paramilitaries, and “sobels” or “soldier-rebels” in West Africa — a recurrent phenomenon in the 1990s and 2000s — is probably more extensive and undoubtedly richer ethnographically than the literature on African militaries and their social-political roles.³⁵ Whatever the cause for the relative scarcity of work on the history of military government, it is a properly historical subject in its own right, as is the memory of it.

Historians may be mistaken in neglecting such topics of study, but they are in good company. Take for example an extensive prospective study on *Mali 2025*, commissioned by the Malian government over two decades ago, at the end of President Alpha Oumar Konaré's term in office (1992–2002). Prognosticating, *Mali 2025* accurately pointed out many of the weaknesses of previous regimes, and it diagnosed some of the challenges that would sap Konaré's successor, Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–12). Yet, in a striking omission, the document had almost nothing to say

³⁰A counter-argument can be found in Abdel Razzaq Takriti, “Colonial Coups and the War on Popular Sovereignty,” *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 3 (2019): 878–909.

³¹See Joël Glasman and Michelle R. Moyd, “Military and Police,” in *General Labour History of Africa: Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th-21st Centuries*, eds. Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert (Woodbridge, Suffolk [UK]: James Currey, 2019), 333–60; and Marielle Debos and Joël Glasman, eds., “Corps Habillés: Politiques des métiers de l'ordre,” *Politique Africaine* 128 (2012): 1–177.

³²Myron J. Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991).

³³Decker, in *Idi Amin's Shadow*; Idrissa Kimba, ed., *Armée et Politique au Niger* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1998); Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966-1976)* (New York: Algora, 2009); Max Siollun, *Soldiers of Fortune: Nigerian Politics under Buhari and Babangida (1983-1993)* (Abuja: Cassava Republic Press, 2013); Samuel F. C. Daly, *Soldier's Paradise: Militarism in Africa after Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024). For biographical approaches, see Brian J. Peterson, *Thomas Sankara: A Revolutionary in Cold War Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021); Mark Leopold, *Idi Amin: The Story of Africa's Icon of Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

³⁴Asare, *Truth Without Reconciliation*.

³⁵Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, 2nd ed. (London: Hurst, 2007); Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Mike McGovern, *Making War in Côte d'Ivoire* (London: Hurst, 2011); Marielle Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (London: Zed Books, 2016). See also Erik Kennes and Miles Larimer, *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa: Fighting Their Way Home* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).

about the Malian army or its role in public life.³⁶ Tellingly, as a democratic “darling” of donor nations, Mali’s government saw no significant role for the military in the country’s future. Why would it have done? The international financial institutions and other foreign partners of African states had for many years insisted that “good governance” — by which they meant among other things, civilian government — was a prerequisite for improved well-being, security, and prosperity on the continent.³⁷

The idea that “good governance” equals “civilian government” is not, in fact, an equation. It is an assumption widely held and too rarely queried. The citizens of many African states might beg to differ with it. After decades of corruption and self-dealing in the wake of the democratic transition, it is increasingly being put to the test on the ground. Notwithstanding the fact that episodes of military government are inextricably part of the origin story of contemporary “democratic kleptocrac [ies]” like Nigeria, for decades coups d’état have been framed as an antidote to civilian mismanagement.³⁸ Following that line of reasoning, exasperation with the failures of democratic governments may in practice provoke more than mere nostalgia for what is remembered as an orderly age. Gut-wrenching insecurity in several states — notably Mali and Burkina Faso, where nominally democratic regimes failed to prepare for and confront real dangers — can only sharpen such sentiments, which have already had concrete effects on realpolitik. What are we to make of this moment? For historians of contemporary Africa, writing the history and understanding the memory of military government will mean confronting — just as so many citizens are currently doing — the peculiar failures of democracy in the neoliberal era.

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³⁶Mohamed Diallo, ed., *Mali 2025*, 2 vols. (Bamako: DFA, 2001).

³⁷Brenda Chafin and Omolade Adunbi, “Governance,” in Desai and Masquelier, *Critical Terms*, 154–63.

³⁸Ellis, *This Present Darkness*, 155; Nugent, “Khaki Fatigue.”