RUTH FIRST

The Barrel of a Gun

Political Powerin Africa and the Coup d'Etat

In this powerful and concentrated examination of army interventions in African politics, Ruth First produces a general theory of power for independent states which goes a long way towards explaining why they are so vulnerable to military coups. She gives detailed accounts of the coups in Nigeria, the Sudan and Ghana, and includes material on the role of the army in Algeria and Egypt, showing the kinds of conflict which lead to the situation where the political machinery is short-circuited and guns do the leading. She makes use of interviews, conveying a vivid idea of what a coup means to those involved in it.

'I count myself an African', writes Ruth First, 'and there is no cause I hold dearer.' And though she makes harsh judgement on Africa's independent leaderships, her purpose is not to confirm irrational European prejudice but to contribute to the continent's ultimate liberation.

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Political Power in Africa
and the Coup d'Etat

Introduction and Part I: The Silent Clamour for Change

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After God, it is above all to our armed forces that I must express the gratitude of the nation.

President Senghor of Senegal, after an abortive coup against his government.

It wasn't a coup. We only relieved two quarrelling Presidents of their duties.

Colonel Alphonse Alley of Dahomey

INTRODUCTION

This book is about army interventions in politics, but more about politics than armies. This is in the hope that, from an examina- tion of the crisis in politics, coup and counter-coup, there will grow, tentatively at least, a general theory of power for newly independent states which explains why they are so vulnerable to army interventions in politics. It is not, accordingly, a book about the mechanics of armies and coups d'etat, their logistics and command structures, but about the way army interventions in politics reveal the nature of political power and its areas of failure in Africa. The army coup d'etat is plainly a short-circuit of power conflicts in a situation where arms do the deciding. What is the kind of conflict? And what does the decision entail?

Tracing the development of a single African army coup d'etat does, I believe, tell more about soldiers and politicians, and their clashes and compromises, than a mere factual inventory of all the coups on the continent. On the other hand, while the coups d'etat in Africa may spring from like causes, they are not identical. And so, more than examination of a particular coup d'etat is needed. I have looked especially closely at Nigeria and Ghana; and at the Sudan (with its two very different coups in a decade). Algeria and Egypt figure, too; for the coup d'etat is a feature of political crisis in all parts of the Third World, and the inclusion of these countries, with their bodies in Africa but their heads in the Middle East, is an opportunity to consider Africa from Third World perspectives. Most of the other coups make incidental appearances.

An account devoted exclusively to fact could present an Africa that is desiccated and dull. It must lose, for instance, the sense of pulsating life in the streets of West Africa, where the rum- bustious spirit seems so incompatible with the earnest political

futility in high places. I have tried to convey something of the way people see, and say things about, their condition, in the scattered, sometimes unattributed, quotations throughout the book. One word about titles: they are often omitted not out of casualness or disrespect but because, especially in these new and heaving states and armies, they change so often. I have drawn heavily on much of the writing about Africa and about armies in the new states, and am indebted to it, though in the course of this investigation I changed most of my – and many of the accepted – notions about independent Africa. There has been the risk, in the range of countries I have selected, of advancing propositions based on selective example. I have tried to avoid this by including sufficient detail, consonant with the purpose of each example, and sufficient generalization to make the exercise relevant to more than those immediately affected.

The account of the coups is based on what 'official' accounts there are – the Ghanaian army men have been prolific in print – and on what press coverage, African and European, exists; but mostly on interviews with as many participants and close witnesses as I could meet in visits to Africa between r964 and r968. The rather numerous footnotes and references are there that others may test the evidence; for much about these contemporary events is still controversy rather than record. There were numberless interviews. Some of those interviewed are quoted anonymously, for they preferred it so.

In particular I would like to thank the following: Patrick Lefevre and Chris de Broglio helped with the French material, and Dr Farouk Mohammed Ibrahim, Omar al Zein, Tigani al-Taib and very many others in the Sudan with the Sudanese. Countless people in West Africa generously gave both information and hospitality. Tom Wengraf helped me with material on Algeria, and Dan Schechter of the Africa Research Group and *Ramparts* magazine helped with American sources. Discussion with and a paper on the military by Desmond Morton during a London School of Economics seminar conducted by Dr Ralph Miliband helped sharpen the topic for me. Ken Post read the first draft and talked over and helped tackle some of the problems the book raised; his own work is frequently acknowledged in the

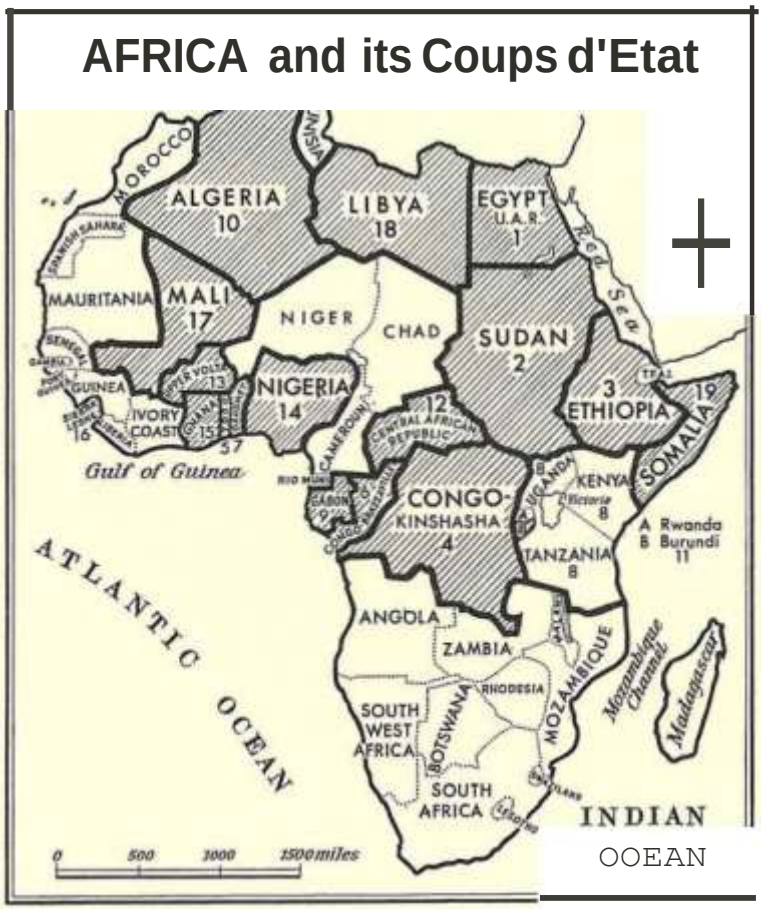
chapters of this book. Professor Thomas Hodgkin criticized searchingly, though with never-failing courtesy; he is in no way responsible for any good advice not followed. Albie Sachs read and suggested textual improvements to the first draft. Ruth Vaughan helped with typing and early research.

I am grateful for a grant from the Leon Fellowship of the University of London. Ronald Segal thought of the subject and steered the book through its life. Above all, my husband Joe Slovo bore with it, and with me, as this book was written; he inspired much of it, and made its writing possible. Its faults are all mine, of course.

Harsh judgements are made in this book of Africa's independence leaderships. Yet this book is primarily directed not to the criticism, but to the liberation of Africa, for I count myself an African, and there is no cause I old dearer.

London
November 1969

SCOREBOARD



1. *United Arab Republic* (Egypt). July 1952. Monarchy overthrown by Free Officers' Movement.
2. *Sudan.* November 1958. General Abboud seizes power, military junta rules till 1964.

   May 1969. Free Officers' Movement seizes power for popular front government.

3· *Ethiopia.* December 1960. Abortive coup d'etat against the Emperor by the Imperial Guard.

4· *Congo-Kinshasa.* General Mobutu seizes power temporarily in 1960, and again in November 1965.

5· *Togo.* January 1963. President Olympio killed in coup, power handed to President Grunitzky.

6. *Congo-Brazzaville.* August 1963. Abbe Youlou overthrown, army oversees handing over of power to Massemba-Debat.
June 1966. Abortive coup attempt.
September 1968. Captain Raoul takes power, to be succeeded as President by Colonel Ngouabi.

7· *Dahomey.* December 1963. Colonel Soglo overthrows President Maga, re-arranges the government.
December 1965. General Soglo intervenes again in November, and December. December 1967. Soglo is deposed and a govern- ment headed by Colonel Alley is installed.

8. *Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda.* January 1964. Army mutinies, put down with the help of British forces.

9· *Gabon.* February 1964. Coup d'etat reversed by French intervention.

10. *Algeria.* June 1965. Ben Bella deposed by Colonel Boumedienne.
December 1967. Coup led by Colonel Zbiri defeated.

11. *Burundi.* October 1965. Army officers overthrow monarchy.
November 1966. Captain Micombero and a group of army officers take power.

12. *Central African Republic.* January 1966. Colonel Bokassa deposes President David Dacko.

13. *Upper Volta.* January 1966. Colonel Lamizana deposes President Yameogo.

14. *Nigeria.* 15 January 1966. Coup d'etat initiated by young officers taken control of by General Ironsi.
29 July 1966. Coup wrests power from Ironsi, installs Gowon government.

15. *Ghana.* February 1966. General Ankrah and Police Commissioner Harlley form a government after the deposition of Nkrumah. April 1967. Abortive coup led by Lieutenant Arthur.

16. *Sierra Leone.* March 1967. Lieutenant Colonel Juxon-Smith heads a government which takes power from Sir Albert Margai.
April 1968. A coup from the ranks results in the return to civilian rule, under Siaka Stevens.

17. *Mali.* November 1968. Young officers' coup headed by Lieutenant Moussa Traore removes the Modibo Keita government.

r8. *Libya.* September 1969. A Revolutionary Command Council which includes two army officers deposes the monarchy.

19. *Somalia .* October 1969. A group of lieutenant-colonels and colo- nels installs a Revolutionary Council in place of the Somali Youth League government.

And, in the years between and after, numbers of other coups d'etat, like abortive attempts in Niger (December 1963), in Senegal in 1962, in the Ivory Coast in 1963; the attempted overthrow of Colonel Ojulcwu's government in Biafra, several attempts to unseat the government that rules Mali; and a reported coup attempt in Congo-Brazzaville in November 1969.

Part I

Silent Clamour for Change

During the years I was in the State Department, I was awakened once or twice a month by a telephone call in the middle of the night announcing a coup d'etat in some distant capital with a name like a typographical error.

George W. Ball, *The Discipline of Power*

Gentlemen and Officers

'Army coups in Africa? 'friends said caustically. 'You had best suggest to the publisher a loose-leaf book, or a wad of blank pages at the back.' Army men have by now unmade and remade governments in one out of every four of the continent's independent states. Since I started planning this book, nine states have been taken over by their armies. As I prepared to visit Nigeria, a West Indian friend, who had gone to teach in West Mric::1 as a devotee of African power on the newly free continent, was leaving. He had found himself in the thick of two military take-overs, at intervals of six months from one another, and had narrowly escaped being taken for an Ibo during the massacres in the North. He wanted still to stay in Africa, to teach and to write, but in a quiet spot this time. 'No more coups, I think it'll have to be Sierra Leone.' Nine weeks after he arrived in Freetown, there was an army coup. A year later, on my way back from Nigeria and Ghana, I dropped in to see him in Freetown. The very night I arrived we were stopped by armed soldiers at a road-block. A coup to end the regime installed by the coup of a year earlier was in full swing. From his house veranda, we watched soldiers searching the neighbourhood. They were rounding up the officer corps.

Sandhurst and St Cyr, the journalists were saying, had succeeded the London School of Economics and Ecole Normale William Panty in Dakar as the training-ground of Africa's leaders. (The Sandhurst and St Cyr curricula were probably over-due for change.) Africa was becoming another Latin America, where political instability has long been chronic. There, modern political history is a chaotic account of coups and counter-coups, of precipitate but meaningless changes of president, minister, cabinet, government and army chief. One

professional soldier replaced another at the head of government. Sometimes the .military unmade the very power formation they had themselves installed. A coup every eight months, or twelve, in some states; elsewhere, a breathing space, before another spurt of *golpe cuartelazo* (barracks-room revolt), or *golpe de estado* (coup d'etat), or some combination of the two. The very language of coups has attained a peculiar finesse in Latin America. Violence has nearly always been present; fundamental change, virtually always absent.

By the time the coup d'etat reached Africa, men of more blase societies – whose own nation states had evolved through revolution and civil war, but in an earlier era- were already adapted. The Sierra Leone coup, said a United States Embassy official in Freetown, was just 'a Mickey Mouse show'. African countries, said the sceptics, were like television stars : in the news with a coup today, forgotten tomorrow, or confused with each other in a succeeding coup.

It has proved infectious, this seizure of government by armed men, and so effortless. Get the keys of the armoury; turn out the barracks; take the radio station, the post office and the airport; arrest the person of the president, and you arrest the state. In the Congo, where the new state disintegrated so disastrously so soon after independence, Colonel Mobutu, army chief-of-staff, 'clarified' the situation by taking the capital with 200 men. At the time it was a larger force than any other single person controlled in Leopoldville. In Dahomey, General Soglo, who had come to power by a coup d'etat, was overthrown by sixty paratroopers in December 1967. In Ghana 500 troops, from an army of Io,ooo, toppled supposedly one of the most formidable systems of political mobilization on the continent. In the Sudan two bridges over the Nile command Khartoum; and the unit that gets its guns intposition first, commands the capital. In Dahomey a Minister of Foreign Affairs was heard to boast about one of that country's three coups d'etat, that not a shot had been fired, not even a blank; not a tear-gas grenade had been thrown; and not a single arrest had been made. Dahomey's army men staged three coups in five years and thus far hold the record for Africa.

It seems to be done with little more than a few jerks of the trigger-finger; and there are, often, no casualties; Nigeria and Ghana were exceptions. Sierra Leone had fewer than half a hundred officers in her army by r968. The coup that toppled the military government, itself brought to office by a coup d'etat a year earlier, was organized by privates and by non-commissioned officers. The army consisted of one battalion. A barracks on a lovely flowered hillside in the capital was the single power centre. The billiards room in the officers' mess was the scene of a brief tussle for control. The following morning, the debris was slight; some broken Coca-Cola bottles and cues lying awry on the green baize, and, in a ditch not far from the barracks, a car belonging to an officer who had tried to escape. After this coup, the entire army was in the control of two officers recalled from abroad – the rest were confined to the Pademba Road police station – and the police force was in the hands of two officers brought back from retirement. In Ghana Colonel Afrifa, or, as he came to be called after promotion, 'The Young Brigadier', was criticized for the detail he included in his chronicle of the Ghana co1,1p. All that a conspirator had to do was read the relevant chapter, it was said, Lieutenant Arthur did, in fact, stage an abortive counter-coup a year later, following much the same pattern as Mrifa had outlined. There had not yet been an instance of a lieutenant staging a successful coup in Africa, said Arthur. He aimed to be the first to do so. For the formation of the new military junta, he had counted out all colonels and above.

The facility of coup logistics and the audacity and arrogance of the coup-mal<ers are equalled by the inanity of their aims, at least as many choose to state them. At its face value, the army ethos embodies a general allergy to politicians; a search for unity and uprightness; and service to the nation. Nigeria's First Republic collapsed, said General Gowan, because it lacked high moral standards, Nzeogwu, the young major who made that particular coup, talked in more fevered but comparable terms of a strong, united and prosperous Nigeria, free from corruption and internal strife. In the Central African Republic Colonel Jean Bedel Bokassa's Revolutionary Council announced a campaign to clean up morals, that would forbid drum-playing and

lying about in the sun except on Saturdays and holidays. Colonel Lamizana of Upper Volta said, 'The people asked us to assume responsibility. The army accepts.' It is the simple soldier's view of politics, a search for a puritan ethic and a restoration of democracy unsullied by corrupt politicians. It is as though, in the army books and regulations by which the soldiers were drilled, there is an entry: *Coups, justification for;* and beside it, the felicitous phrases that the coup-makers repeat by rote.

The coup is becoming conventional wisdom not only among Africa's army men, but among her young intellectuals. In the exile cafes of Paris and the bed-sitters of London, and on the university campuses of the United States, young aspirants for power, or social change, consider the making or unmaking of African governments in terms of their contacts within the army. Power changes hands so easily at the top, and the political infrastructure is so rapidly rendered tractable. Government shifts in a single night from State House to barracks. There are fresh names, ranks and titles to be learned. The photographers ready their cameras for the new official pictures: uniforms instead of double-breasted suits; the open army look instead of the politician's knowing glance. In place of laws lengthily disputed in debating chambers, come swift decrees in civil service jargon. There is more punctuality, less pomp, total pragmatism. 'Efficiency' becomes the outstanding political principle. Political argument, once exuberantly fatuous in the mouths of career politicians, is stilled. In the political vacuum where the soldiers rule, the role and purpose of armed men go unquestioned. At the outset, it is enough for them to announce that they rule for the nation. Power lies in the hands of those who control the means of violence. It lies in the barrel of a gun, fired or silent.

What is this Africa that soldiers are taking over ? The Third World consists of three vast continents, and Africa is one of them. She is united with Latin America less by any close resemblance between, say, Brazil, Venezuela or Peru, and Algeria, Uganda or Ghana, than by their mutual relationship to forces outside the three continents, which aggravate their poverty, their dependence and their dilemmas. Latin America has had its spate of military coups; Africa seems to be in hot pursuit. Neither

continent has found countervailing forces against the firepower of the clique in uniform. In Latin America, though, there is Cuba, capital of social revolution for the continent, where a popular guerrilla army and popular rising displaced the putsch and achieved a seizure of power different in character. Africa, for her part, has Guine Bissau, where Amilcar Cabral and his party propose to lead a social revolution through armed struggle by an army of political volunteers. Both continents grapple with the threat and tlie reality of outside intervention, with the visible and concealed roots of dependence, with mounting national indebtedness and the prospect of stability in massive want and conspicuous corruption.

Not that the continents of the Third World are the same, or their political crises and uniformed presidents interchangeable. In Latin America the military emerged in alliance with the traditional power of land-owners; and later, when new social and economic forces developed, intervened in contests between the forces of the countryside and those of the city, between indigenous vested interests in industry and organized labour.[1] In some countries there is a long history of student protest with an explosive revolutionary content. There has been a long-standing United States defence and security policy of keeping the continent 'stable' by coddling dictators, especially those in uniform.* In Africa the economy is less developed by far; social forces are still largely inchoate; and the continent, except for some key areas like the Congo, and Ethiopia on the Red Sea and near the Middle East, is lower on the foreign-policy lists of the big powers. What Latin America endured yesterday, Africa may encounter, with due variation, today. Yet the identity of plight and purpose between the continents of the Third World is obscure or irrelevant to the vast majority of the men who rule over most of Africa. I rarely heard them talk about Vietnam, or China, or Cuba, or even Guine-Bissau. The revolutionary turmoils of the Third World in our century are passing them by. Africa is one, of course, but it is a skin-deep connexion. About the vast and vital areas of the unliberated south there is concern, but only

*A confidence in the military that may wane now that the army leaders in Peru have begun expropriating US oil interests.

ricocheting knowledge. Ghanaians, supporters of both Nkrumah and Ankrah regimes, have said to me that the Southern African liberation movement should 'struggle' for independence as Ghana did. 'We had twenty-nine shot dead before we gained our independence,' they admonish. There seems so little awareness of the structure of White power in the south; no insight into the strategies of struggle there, of how far back it goes and how many hundreds have lost their lives. What independent Africa has not herself experienced, she does not easily recognize. She can be only too careless in her ignorance, and smug in her superiority. Men who still struggle for independence are considered unrealistic, for all the advice that they should struggle onwards. They should know better than to espouse hopeless causes or to fight for goals beyond the reach of the manipulating politician or the coup-making officer. I cannot forget the remark of a young Nigerian politician, who not long before had enjoyed a reputatioTJ. for radicalism and even been imprisoned for his politics. H and a friend were discussing the then recently reported death of Che Guevara at the hands of the Bolivian army and the CIA. 'What could he expect if he went messing about in other peoples' countries?' he exclaimed. In Britain, the United States and Cuba, Black Power advocates declare: 'We will hook up with the Third World. We will go for the eye of the octopus, while our brothers sever its tentacles.' Many in Africa have not yet recognized eye or tentacle.

Africa is the last continent of the Third World come to political independence. She is the deepest sunk in economic backwardness. She has the most appalling problems. And she revels in the most effusive optimism. In the offices of the world organizations, the international diagnosticians, planners, technocrats -experts all, if not partisans -retreat steadily from hope. Their figures and graphs show that the continent is more likely to slide backwards than to stride forwards. The assets of three United States corporations, General Motors, Du Pont and the Bank of America, exceed the gross domestic product of all Africa, South Africa included. What Africa produces, with a few exceptions like copper and oil in fortunate places, is less and less wanted by the international market. Prices are dropping;

Africa's share in the total of world tlade is declining. Schemes for commodity price stabilization, if they can be agreed, may help for a while. But even as the parties bargain, the chemical laboratories are making synthetically what Africa strains to grow.

Africa is a continent of mass poverty, but the obsession of the ruling groups is with luxuries. The same could be said in indictment of countless societies. But those who came to power mouthing the rhetoric of change faced the critical poverty of their countries with frivolity and fecklessness. Their successors, the soldiers, have an ingenuous faith in 'efficiency' and the simple army ethos of honesty. They detect the problems no more acutely than did the men they overthrew, probably, indeed, not as much. They discuss the problems less often, for such are 'politics'.

There bas been eloquent, inexhaustible talk in Africa about politics, side by side with the gaping poverty of political thought. Down there on the ground in Africa, you can smother in the small talk of politics. Mostly it is about politicking, rarely about policies. Politicians are men who compete with one another for power, not men who use power to confront their country's problems. The military formations, the uniforms, the starch, the saluting aides-de-camp, the parade-ground precision might look, at last, like the decisiveness of purpose that Africa needs in its leadership. They camouflage a regimented sterility of ideas and social policy.

Africa is not everywhere the same, of course. Ethiopia is ruled like Machiavelli's polity: with Prince, aristocracy, palace intrigue, Church and army; and an American military base and Israeli-trained security service thrown in for good measure to reinforce an ancient dynastic power base built on an utterly wretched peasantry. Liberia, with an economy dominated by an international rubber company, is ruled by a Black settler elite, crowned by twelve families and a top-hatted President, disdaining the rights of 'indigenous' Africans as American whites once disdained those of the freed slaves, who werethefoundingfathers of this American-style plantation colony. In some states monarchs these days behave like presidents, and presidents aspire to be

monarchs. In others, party programmes conjure splendid visions of African-style democracy, even socialism; yet the problem is to generate not only enthusiasm, but, more difficult, capital accumulation for development. In Kenya, and in the Ivory Coast, much of the surplus is absorbed by a combine of foreign corporations, with their resident representatives, and the related small circle of Africans on the make. West Africa is a whirlpool of candidates for quick profits, contracts and commissions, rake-off. Tanzania's under-development bred a sense of egalitarian-ism, albeit in poverty, which has now been augmented by attempts to proscribe the growth of a privileged group. Here and there are political systems committed to austerity and develop-ment, not spectacular consumption. Across the continent from West Africa, along the Nile, there is a greater austerity of living, but the same massive poverty and lack of *policy.* In Egypt a generation of army officers and students, pampered to lead their country and uplift the peasantry, dream of the night-clubs and neon-lit shop windows of Europe.

Everywhere, under the mobilization systems inaugurated by Nkrumah, Modibo Keita and Sekou Toure, Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda, as well as under the free enterprise of the Margais, Okotie-Ebohs and Mobutus, African development has been held to ransom by the emergence of a new, privileged, African class. It grows through politics, under party systems, under military governments, from the ranks of business, and from the corporate elites that run the state, the army and the civil service. In some countries, its growth is virtually free, in the sense that, though resources themselves may be fast exhausted, there is no social or economic policy to limit the size or domin-ance of this class. In other countries, policy is opposed to its very existence, but it persists all the same. National styles, territorial distinctions, and even divergent policy commitments blur into the continent-wide style of the newly rich. They are obsessed with property and personal performance in countries where all but a tiny fringe own hardly more than a hoe, a plastic bucket, an ironware cooking pot or two, and perhaps a bicycle. On the plane from Rome to Lagos there was a young man who had spent a year in Milan training to operate a computer. On his

little airline trolley he carried as much haul as a peasant family in Africa or even Italy might work a decade to earn. Milan, he said, had been all right, but the Italians, though they worked so hard, 'don't seem to be getting anywhere'. Africa's elite is working hard at getting somewhere. Few of them read Frantz Fanon, yet they are living out his description of them: 'Spoilt children of yesterday's colonialism and of ':oday's governments, they organize the loot of whatever national resources exist.'

There are, of course, those who have always been convinced that Africans are unfit to rule themselves, that Empire opted out of Africa too quickly, and that the continent was bound to go into decline after the premature granting of independence. But the crises of Africa have nothing to do with any such supposed incapacity of Africans to govern themselves. Independence delayed longer would have made the continent less, not better, able to meet the political and economic challenges of independence. Those who seek comfort in the tumult because they can ascribe it to black inferiority close their eyes to the depredations of the slave trade; the colonial role in Africa; and the political horrors perpetrated in Europe and elsewhere, by Whites and European political systems on a far more shuddering scale. It is the old paternalism of seeing London, Washington or Paris as the norm, which the rest of the world must follow, at peril of Western censure. It is time to judge Africa by what Africans need and want, and not by what the West finds congenial.

On the other hand, Africa needs a pitiless look at herself. It must be a long look, without the sentimentality which is the other side of colonial patronage. It is no answer to an indictment of the way Africans have handled their independence to ask, 'Could others have done better ?' If they had not managed, they should have been subject to the same sharp criticism. Yet it is, after all, less than ten years since Africa became independent. That is no time at all to advance a continent as ravaged as any other, and that started with fewer advantages than most. Africa rightly rejects a time-scale that measures her need by the time taken by others to assuage theirs. 'We took a hundred years, after all; have patience', is chilling comfort. There is no patience. Too much time has been lost or squandered.

Much that needs to be said on the continent is not said, or not so that others can hear. James Ngugi, the Kenya novelist, has warned of the 'silent clamour for change that is now rocking' Africa. Yet, sounding close to despair, Wole Soyinka has anticipated that the African writer will before long envy the South African the bleak immensity of his problems. 'For the South African still has the right to hope; and this prospect of a future yet uncompromised by failure on his own part, in his own right, is something which has lately ceased to exist for other African writers.' Soyinka was considering the failure of writers; but of others, too, more directly culpable. The velvet-cushion commandos, he once called them in his own country, the men who rode to office and prosperity on the wave of independence, while the great majority saw no change from colonialism to independence.

Is there a group compromised by failure ? Perhaps for some the anti-elite invective in this book will be too strong. Criticism made of persons or their roles is only incidental to a criticism, substantially, of systems and of policies. The targets are not individuals, but their place in an interest group. Civil servants come under fire nobecause Africa cannot produce some of the best, but because the very virtues avowedly possessed by a bureaucracy are inimical to the growth of self-government. Politicians condemn themselves out of their own mouths by their professed purposes and their subsequent performance. The army, whatever its declarations of noble intent, generally acts for army reasons. Where it does not, it has, in the nature of army structures and ethos, the greatest difficulty in initiating more than a temporary holding action. Above all, traditional armies believe that it is possible to create a policy without politics. This opens not new avenues but new culs-de-sac.

For many, the indictment should not be of Africans, whatever their record, but of the outside forces responsible, ultimately, for the plight of the continent. That indictment stands. It cannot be framed too often. But that approach, too, on its own, is a form of patronage; for it makes the African ever victim, never perpetrator. If independent Africa is far from the political promise of independence, let alone from social change, this is

not because she does not need it. She needs change no less, at least, than Latin America; but the Americas seem closer to change and their needs therefore nearer assuagement. She is far from change because there are formidable world forces against it, and because her colonial experience hangs a dread weight upon her; but also because she has produced few leaderships, these independent years, that want it. The old generation of independence politicians is largely played out, exhausted. There are too few exceptions – until new forces stir – to stop the debacle in all but a few enclaves. The generation, whether politician, administrator or soldier, that comes forward to replace *les anciens* from the euphoric days of independence, is greedy for its prizes; and, for the most part, even less .concerned with the polity, let alone the people. A different force is stirring, among the secondary-school students, the urban unemployed, the surplus graduates of the indulged coastlines, the neglected and impoverished of the northern interiors. As yet the pockets of discontent are scattered, hesitant and unassertive, or easily obliterated. The disaffected are bewildered by the confusions and lost causes in the litter of the generation that wrested independence, and are fumbling for a coherent resolve. They are not rebels without a cause, but, stirring to rebellion, are still unsure of their cause, and the means to advance it. Will the search for change be pre-empted or pursued by the entry of the army into government ?

Think-Tank Theories

Coups have become a growth industry for academics as well as for military men, and the models and theories, up-dated and reshaped, are coming thick and fast. An early classification encompassing the whole world was that of Finer.[2] His man on horseback, the military, intervened in politics according to levels of political culture, which were determined by the strength or weakness of attachment to civilian institutions. The higher the level of political culture, the fewer would be the opportunities for the military, and the less support the military would receive.

The lower the level of political culture, the more numerous the opportunities, and the greater the likelihood of public support. (The coup is taken as the index of civil-military relations; but military organizations can exert a strong influence on government policy without recourse to a coup.) This framework, Ralph Miliband has said,a is not necessarily harmful, but it is not very illuminating either. The theory does not answer the question why coups occur in some states of 'minimal political culture', and not in others, and why they take one form in some states and another somewhere else. It is a universal classification that leaves much unaccounted for and unexplained.

The search for an overall classification system has been punctuated by quantitative studies probing for the role of the isolated common factor : stage of economic development; types of political organization; length of independ nce period; size of army. The computer as a substitute for social analysis has produced arid or trivial conclusions – such as that the chances of military involvement increase year by year after independence. (Self-evident, one would think, seeing that only after independence did Africans get control of armies and politics, and any assault on a colonial administration would fall into the category not of coup, but of rebellion.) Janowitz has explored the relationship between economic development and limitations on the political role of the military in a sample of fifty-one developing nations. Empirical results, he found, were mainly negative or unreliable. The argument that the more economically developed a nation, the less likely a military intervention, was not borne out.[4] The size of the army and its firepower have not been decisive; nor has the proportion of the state's military expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product. Others [5] have traced the correlation between coups and one-party, two-party, multiparty, no-effective-party states; but coups have occurred with a fine disregard for these earnestly constructed systems. (Some tried to explain the coup as the logical outcome of the one-party system, where the army played the role of opposition; but Dahomey and the Congo, Sierra Leone and Nigeria were scarcely one-party states.) As Van Doorn said, summarizing the

work of the experts, 'almost every tendency shows its counterpart'.[6]

Scrutiny directed to the political party or the political system next turned to the social structure and motivation of the army. Records of military training schools have been combed for the social background of officers, and their attitudes, with the army's promotion structure studied for sources of tension between professionals competing to advance their careers, for motives of intervention in politics. Throughout Africa, with the exception of Algeria, Finer argued, armies had a low fiashpoint, or small propensity to intervene. Yet they intervened. Disposition to intervene, as Finer showed, proved to be a skein of motives, mood and opportunity. But descriptions of military organization and the social origins of soldiers are not likely to be helpful outside the context of the social and political system. In many instances, the origins of 'a coup are obscure, and the intentions of those staging them are mixed. The army acts for army reasons, but for others as well. A military coup needs the participation of a professional army or core of officers, but it need not be precipitated, or even planned, by the military alone, [7] for military reasons.

Some general theories have emerged. There is the theory that the army in under-developed countries is the modernizer; that soldiers are endowed with all sorts of virtues as dynamic, self-sacrificing reformers.[8] For from where else are new social policies and institutional reform to come ?

A volume planned as *The Politics of Change in Latin America* became, in the course of writing, *The Politics of Conformity in Latin America.* [9] Social groups committed, it was thought, to producing structural change, have attained power, but not to implement reforms; rather, they have worked to integrate themselves into the existing social structure. An apparently new middle group has turned out to be an extension of the traditional upper class, in economic position and in basic values. Reforms considered essential for the continent have not taken place. Groups which seemed likely to promote economic development 'have not even managed to achieve recognition, much less the capacity to dictate policy'.[10] Guerrilla struggle in Latin America

is posed precisely to break up the politics of conformity, as Robin Blacl{burn has pointed out.[11]

The false model for Latin America has been Europe's early bourgeoisie (with, behind it, a distinctive method of primary capital accumulation) and the Western parliamentary system. It has been the wrong model. In Latin America, intelligent and facile answers have been given to the wrong questions. The model for Africa cannot be Latin America, for conditions, once again, are too disparate; and, besides, the model has plainly not worked in Latin America. What are the right questions for Africa?

Armies, it was said, would not move into politics in Africa because they were so small.[12] The strength of the army has turned out to be the weakness of other forces in the society. This can be illuminated only by looking at both army and politics, and their mutual inter-action. Many questions have to be asked. Who rules Africa under independence ? What are the main elements in the chronic instability of these states ? How is political power concentrated or dispersed, and why can the action of a small armed group so effortlessly capture it? Why, thus, when there has been a blow at the top of the power structure, does it seem so irrelevant to the polity as a whole? What of the institutions of state, and in particular the management of the economy ? What of the people, down below ? Who is dispossessed by a coup; who raised to power? Was the conflict over who exercised power, or how it was exercised ? Why does the army, and not some other group, play the pivotal role in new states ? Who are the military men under their uniforms; whose sons and brothers ? Do they represent distinctive social forces ? The dispossessed ? Themselves alone ? Do captains of the army hope to become captains of industry, or of commerce ? What triggers the coup ? Does the army act for inner army reasons, or for reasons that flow from the wider polity? *Or* both? Coups, clearly, decide who will rule for the moment; but do they, could they, change the character of the society or its political system? Do they promote change, or conformity ? Where coups have failed, what have been the sources of their defeat ? Are all army coups equivalent, all military governments comparable ? What

can the barracks produce that the politicians, or the economic planners, have not ? Does the army file back to barracks on its own?

These questions apart, there is the issue of foreign intervention. A theory of conspiracy sees all the ills of the Third World as visited on her by outside forces. Very many of them are. No doubt, in time, more information will come to light about exact connexions between foreign states, military attaches and coup-making army officers. Until the evidence does become available – and that, in the nature of things, will take time - this account of coups d'etat calculates on intervention playing an insidious and sophisticated role, but not the only role, and often not even a decisive one. For there are two sets of causes for a coup. The one is deep-seated, in the profound dependence of Africa on external forces. The economic levers that move or brake Africa are not within her boundaries, but beyond them. Nkrurnah was brought down as much by the plummeting price of cocoa in the world market as by his army and police officers. Whether governments are working well or badly – and his was working badly – the state of particular commodity markets or a drying up of loans could be their undoing. Apart from the tripwire of France's military presence in Africa (of which more in a subsequent chapter), any economic breeze in Paris blows gales through African economies; and M. Foccart, France's Secretary for African and Malagasy Affairs, is generally better able to decide their role than the African presidents themselves. The second set of reasons lies in the tensions and fragility of the African state. This book focuses mainly on this set of reasons. Foreign powers and counter-insurgency agencies reckon acutely on them as I try to show in Part 6. Agents, counter-insurgency teams, mercenaries like 5 and 6 Commando in the Congo, undoubtedly exist; but there are also patient, knowledgeable and deliberate probes of the weak points in a state which it is policy to assail. The shadow-play of neo-colonial politics is often improvised locally, Roger Murray has said.[13] In a search for the genesis of the coup, Africa must address herself not only to the airports where agents arrive, but to her own inner condition. The Bay of Pigs assault on Cuba did nor bring that government

down. The column of soldiers that marched on Flagstaff House from the garrison at Tamale did. The reasons are important. It is the groundswell of African politics which makes army coups possible, and while giving armies internal reasons for striking, gives other forces little or no defence.

Not all army, or armed, interventions in politics are equivalent, nor do they all take the shape of coups d'etat. Zanzibar is usually included in lists of army interventions: but in January r964, when the Sultan and a minority government entrenched under a colonial constitution were overthrown, it was by popular, armed insurrection. In Congo-Brazzaville, also usually included in the list, the Youlou regime was brought down in 1963 by strikes, demonstrations and conferences of youth activists and trade-unionists; and the army – though its refusal to fire on the crowds massed outside the presidential palace made it the decisive force in overturning the government- played a self-effacing role. Only during a subsequent political crisis, in 1966, did the army strike its own blow against the state and enter government. Uganda is generally not included in lists of African coups d'etat, except as one of the three East African states which experienced a brief and easily suppressed army pay mutiny in 1964. Uganda has not experienced an army take-over, and has no army men in her government. But in May 1966, a long-festering conflict there between the central government and the kingdom of Buganda came to a head, and the army was used to subdue the Kabaka and his palace guard. The action was directed by President Obote's civilian regime. But the Uganda army was crucial in that confrontation, and has been the nexus of power in Uganda ever since.[14] Army interventions on behalf of government, such as that in Uganda, can be taken for granted as an extension of their role as guardians of the state; they can also be by virtual self-invitation, as in Gabon, where President Bongo made room in his cabinet for several of the senior army command, in what looked like a bold attempt to pre-empt the army's taking the seats for itself.*

The army coup d'etat, though, is not equivalent to *any* political use of the army by government. Nor is it equivalent to

* March 1969.

any use of violence to effect change; or even to any sudden, forceful substitution of one ruling element for another. These could be rebellion or revolution, where groups, small and conspiratorial, or representing great masses of people, act to seize the state: either to press for changes within the accepted framework, or to substitute new forms of government and political system. The coup can only be undertaken 'by a group that is already a participant in the existing political system and that possesses institutional bases of power within the system. In particular the instigating group needs the support of some elements of the armed forces,'[15]

The coup d'etat can pre-empt revolution, or lead to it. It can install a military, or an alternative civilian, government. It can maintain, or change social policy. In its essence, the coup is a lightning action at the top, in which violence is the ultimate determinant, even if it is not used. The conspiratorial strike is the secret of its success, not the mobilization of popular masses or their mandate. Any armed group can, theoretically, effect a coup; but it would have to immobilize or confront the army, police and other security apparatus of the state. Army coups d'etat involve the army as principal protagonist and conspirator, even if it withdraws to the barracks once the action is over.

The army does not always move monolithically. A successful coup may be staged by the army command itself, by a section of the officer corps, by non-commissioned officers, or even by privates, if each such group can take the necessary steps to immobilize counter-action from the levels of command above it. Senior military commanders have tended to identify with the government in power and to have substantial stakes in preserving the *status quo.* Younger officers have tended to identify with their generation in politics or the civil service; if that generation is critical of the political order, its representatives in uniform may employ arms to re-arrange the order itself. The critical coup-making rank was generally considered to be the colonels and other middle-grade officers, who have command of men and also access to army communications and arsenals. But most ranks have been protagonists in one or other African coup d'etat.

Whatever the political background to a coup d'etat, when the army acts it generally acts for army reasons, in addition to any other it may espouse. Corporate army interests may be predominant, or they may be secondary to other more generalized political grievances; but army reasons are invariably present. The army may long brood over its discontent, biding its time until its contemplated action coincides with a general state of anti-government feeling, as in Ghana; or it may seem oblivious to popular opinion and strike precipitately when it feels it is being affronted or brought under attack, as in Togo.

The striking feature of army interventions in politics is that to almost every coup there is a cotlllter-coup. (Congo-Kinshasa has so far proved a notable exception.) The coup spawns other coups. Some are successful, some fail. And in a single coup cycle, each successive coup tends to be set afoot by a rank lower in the army hierarchy than the one that initiated the sequence. Causes, sequels, and the purpose to which the coup is put, alter; but once the army breaks the first commandment of its training – that armies do not act against their own governments – the initial coup sets off a process. The virginity of the army is like that of a woman, army men are fond of saying: once assailed, it is never again intact.

The Contagion of the Coup

In the sequence of coups on the continent, Egypt was first with its 1952 army-led revolution; but this was an event to which Africa – the Sudan excepted – gave hardly more than a sidelong glance. Nasser came into his own in Black Africa as a soldier-revolutionary only when yotllg majors, like Nzeogwu of Nigeria, diagnosed their political systems as rotten, and sought texts and models for making and justifying a coup to a soldier generation taught that it had no place in politics. The momentous precedent for the coups that have swept across Africa was the overthrow of Lumumba's government, with the murder of Lumumba himself, and the part played by General Mobutu and his army in carving the shape of politics in the Congo. This was

the first time that the legitimacy of the colonial inheritance was defied and denied. And it was done with the connivance – where not the collaboration – of the West and even of the United Nations. The Lumumba government had achieved power by electoral primacy, by constitutional means, by parliamentary choice. But the constitution was one thing, as was the election; the army proved to be quite another. The Congo had a traumatic effect on Africa (especially on Nigerian and Ghanaian army officers who served there, and watched the soldiers arbitrate between or coerce the politicians). Power and control depended on who commanded, and used, the army, and for what purpose. In a political crisis, the army was the only decisive instrument. (One other was more decisive, and this was the role of foreign intervention; for when it was brought into play, it could overrule the decision of the army.)

The politicians were slower than the soldiers to realize the power of the army. It was only after the initial coup d'etat that political leaders planned for the eventuality of another (in Ethiopia, in the Sudan and in Tanzania, where methods were, variously, to split the army command so that one section could be used to prevail against another, or to try and enrol the army in the purposes of government). Even the soldiers were slow to use their striking power for general political ends; and in the beginning, when they moved it was to assert corporate army interests, rather than to make any special political point. Independence was still young, and crisis was not yet mature. Thus the first army coups were pay strikes, to secure better conditions for the army. Each coup grew to larger political purpose; and the later wave of coups had wide political objectives and initiated thorough military take-overs of government. Mter staging a coup in the early phase, the military were content to return to barracks, having installed a new civilian government, or extracted something from an old one. In the later phase, the military abandoned their inhibitions about seizing and running government itself. The Congo, Togo and Dahomey went through early and late phases, both; Ghana and Nigeria established military juntas from the beginning.

Internal characteristics account for the difference, between

coups d'etat and their sequels. One could erect a Heath Robinson coup mechanism, to show how in a particular coup, and in one compared with another, coup-making levers are jerked into play: political and army grievances often correspond; external pressures can be decisive; political levers are jerked by stresses between parties, regions and personalities. The range of minor differences is wide. More significant is what exists in common among Africa's military interventions in politics : the resort to colonial-type, bureaucratic control; the dominance of the administrative class, the civil servants, in the military–bureaucratic governing partnership; the re-arrangement of the personnel operating the political system, without significantly affecting the social and economic structures. The coup as a method of change that changes little has become endemic to Africa's politics.

It has certain contagion. What the military of one state do today, their confreres next door may do tomorrow. Since independence, states have become part of inter-acting sub-systems for regional economic, political and other purposes. They co-operate, and they intervene, directly and indirectly, in one another's affairs. Tensions with Niger aggravated Dahomey's internal crisis.lG Congo-Kinshasa is vitally concerned, and involved, in developments across the river in Congo-Brazzaville. Soglo has explained his take-over in Dahomey as prompted by fear that the scheduled elections might produce disorder similar to that which followed the Western Nigerian elections (many Dahomeyans are Yoruba, and they follow closely Western Nigerian developments).17

The strongest source of contagion, however, lies in the old-boy network of the African armies, and related inter-army inspiration. The military leaders of the former French colonies trained together, fought the same wars together, and several of them (Soglo, Larnizana and Bokasso) are intimates. The young Alley of Dahomey and Eyadema of Togo grew up in the post-Second World War French military tradition. (And if they were seeking an outstanding military prototype, why not General de Gaulle, who came to power on the strength of the army, by subsequently concealed but none the less evident coup d'etat?)

The senior officers of the British-trained West African armies have almost interchangeable careers. Kzeogwu and Afrifa, the young coup-makers of Nigeria and Ghana, were two course- terms apart in their Sandhurst training. Ghanaian coup-makers recount how they were spurred into action by taunts that the Nigerian soldiers who made the coup were Men, after all. What was wrong with Ghana's soldiers? This may be a ration- alization; but if anything made the Ghanaian coup inevitable, it was the staging of the Nigerian coup a month before. The continent-wide cycle is far from complete.