A Club of Incumbents? The African Union and Coups d’État

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ABSTRACT

This Article considers the response of the Organization for African Unity (the OAU, founded in 1963) and its successor, the African Union (the AU, which began operating in 2003) to coups d’état, since 1997. The Article addresses these organizations’ policies concerning unconstitutional changes of government, as well as the application of these policies. In considering these issues, the Article examines the response of the AU to the coups in Togo (2005), Mauritania (2005 and 2008), Guinea (2008), Madagascar (2009), and Niger (2010). In each case, the AU was unwilling to recognize the government that came to power through coup, even when the regime had popular and political support within the state. The Article concludes by arguing that the AU should pursue a more nuanced policy in this area.

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I. INTRODUCTION

From the end of the 1980s, Africa’s one-party states and other authoritarian regimes faced internal and external pressure to conform to liberal democratic norms. As a result, many states adopted multiparty political systems and introduced constitutional provisions for periodic elections and presidential term limits. However, the democratic transitions were often an illusion. The elections were not free and fair, and many incumbents remained in office. Consequently, the degree of democracy among African states continues to vary considerably, with authoritarian regimes at one extreme, functional multiparty systems at the other, and many forms of imperfect democracy in the middle. In 2009, the Freedom House Report described eight African states as fully democratic, twenty-five states as partially democratic, and twenty-one states as authoritarian. The Organization for African Unity (the OAU), founded in 1963, and its successor, the African Union (the AU), which came into operation in 2003, have had the potential to influence the form of state governments in Africa. In practice, however, the OAU and the AU, endorsing the sovereign right of their member states to determine their own political systems, have generally tolerated governments that are undemocratic or imperfectly democratic. The one exception, which has emerged since 1997, concerns unconstitutional changes of government by coup d’état. Despite the argument that acting against coups violates the principle of noninterference in a state’s internal affairs, the OAU and the AU


2. TORDOFF, supra note 1, at 221–22; see also H. Kwasi Prempeh, Africa’s “Constitutionalism Revival”: False Start or New Dawn?, 5 INT’L J. CONST. L. 469, 471, 487–88 (2007) (describing the increase in multiparty elections over the past few decades and the creation of presidential term limits).

3. NUGENT, supra note 1, at 373–74. Examples are Mobutu in Zaire (1965–1997, overthrown in civil conflict); Gnassingbe Eyadema in Togo (1967 until his death in 2005); Omar Bongo in Gabon (1967 until his death in 2009); Biya in Cameroon (1982 to date); Lansana Conte in Guinea (1984 until his death in 2008); Campaore in Burkina Faso (1987 to date); and Idriss Deby in Chad (1990 to date). Id. at 390–95, 396–400.


have opposed coups in the belief that they threaten public order and economic development. Part II of this Article traces the evolution of OAU and AU instruments and policies concerning unconstitutional change. It shows that the AU’s understanding of the circumstances in which sanctions and intervention against coups are justified has progressed beyond that of the OAU. Part III discusses AU practice in relation to successful coups since the formation of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) in 2004. It demonstrates that the AU has consistently refused to recognize governments that come to power through coups even when those governments have popular and political support within the state in question. The Article concludes by arguing that the AU should pursue a more nuanced policy in this area.

II. INSTRUMENTS AND POLICIES ON UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

This Part considers the definitions of unconstitutional change in OAU and AU instruments and the response mechanisms that those instruments provide. It begins with the change in OAU policy as reflected in its decisions and declarations, and then it considers the legal framework provided by AU treaties. It concludes with a discussion of how the range and strength of the proposals contained in the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Good Governance have increased.7

A. The OAU Period (1963–2003)

The Organization for African Unity was established on May 25, 1963.8 Its declared aim was to safeguard African interests by promoting the unity and solidarity of African states and eradicating all forms of colonialism in Africa.9 The OAU generally followed the principles of “[n]on-interference in the internal affairs of States” and “[r]espect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and for its inalienable right to independent existence,” in line with the OAU Charter.10 It did, however, reject white minority rule in Rhodesia and apartheid in South Africa.11

6. See infra Part IIA (discussing the OAU period).
9. OAU Charter, supra note 5, art. II(1)(c)–(d).
10. Id. art. III(2)–(3).
11. See, e.g., OAU Council of Ministers, Resolution on Sanctions Against
the White Minority Regimes in Southern Africa, Doc. No. CM/Res. 422 (XXV)
(1975), http://www.africa-union.org/official_documents/council%20of%20ministers%20meetings/com/6CoM_1975b.pdf (condemning apartheid and authorizing the Administrative Secretary-General to work with anti-apartheid governments);
In other words, noninterference presupposed decolonization. Beyond that minimal requirement, the OAU did not question the internal policies of its member states, even when they maltreated their populations.\textsuperscript{12}

The OAU’s adherence to the principle of noninterference led to a reluctance to take effective action when coups d’état occurred. In principle, the OAU condemned violent coups and the assassination of political leaders as unlawful under the OAU Charter.\textsuperscript{13} In practice, however, the OAU usually accepted whichever government was in effective control of the territory and allowed that government to represent its state within the OAU.\textsuperscript{14}

This trend is illustrated by the unsuccessful attempts by some member states to deny OAU recognition to governments that came to power through coups in Ghana (1966), Uganda (1971), Liberia (1980), and Chad (1982).\textsuperscript{15} Had it done otherwise, the OAU might have been bereft of state representation.\textsuperscript{16} From the formation of the OAU in 1963 to the end of 1989, there were sixty-one successful coups in Africa, and more than half of all African states had at some point been governed by military regimes that had displaced civilian governments.\textsuperscript{17}

It was only after the Cold War that the OAU adopted an anti-coup d’état ethos, which it linked to its commitment to promote democratic institutions and good governance.\textsuperscript{18} Demonstrating a new willingness to become more actively engaged in the internal policies of its member states, the OAU began to deny recognition

\textsuperscript{12}Rachel Murray, Human Rights in Africa: From the OAU to the African Union 17–21 (2004) (discussing the same).


\textsuperscript{14}See Paul D. Williams, From Non-Intervention to Non-Indifference: The Origins and Development of the African Union’s Security Culture, 106 Afr. Aff. 252, 271 (2007) (noting that “the [OAU’s] traditional response to coups d’états was official indifference”).

\textsuperscript{15}Kufuor, supra note 13, at 375.

\textsuperscript{16}Id. at 377–78 (arguing that it would have been too costly to seat “delegates of ousted regimes” and that the majority of OAU member states’ delegations would have been governments-in-exile).

\textsuperscript{17}Monty G. Marshall, CTR. FOR SYSTEMIC PEACE, CONFLICT TRENDS IN AFRICA 1946–2004: A MACRO-COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE, ANNEX 2B: COUPS D’ÉTAT IN AFRICA (2006), http://www.systemicpeace.org/africa/ACPAnnex2b.pdf. The author defines success according to whether coup leaders are able to hold central authority power for more than one week, which is the definition of success adopted in this Article.

\textsuperscript{18}See Williams, supra note 14, at 273 (noting that it was not until July 2000 that the OAU created an official framework for response to coups).
to new governments that came to power through unconstitutional means. This change came only after ten successful coups occurred between January 1990 and May 1997.

The turning point was the OAU response in 1997 to events in Sierra Leone. The government of Tejan Kabbah, which had been democratically elected in March 1996 as part of the peace process ending a six-year civil war, was overthrown by Major Johnny Paul Koromah on May 25, 1997. At its summit meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, from May 28 to 31, 1997, the OAU Assembly called for a return to constitutional government in Sierra Leone and encouraged the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to achieve that goal. The Assembly also called on African states and the international community not to recognize the new regime. In February 1998, a Nigerian-led ECOWAS force (the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)) removed the junta, and Kabbah was reinstated as President.

Next, the OAU articulated a general policy against unconstitutional changes of government. At the OAU Assembly meeting at Algiers, Algeria, in July 1999, the Assembly declared that several governments that had come to power through unconstitutional means since the Harare summit should restore constitutional legality by the next annual summit in 2000. These states were Comoros, Congo Brazzaville, Guinea Bissau, and Niger. Then, at Lomé, Togo, in July 2000, the OAU

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19. See id. (describing the 2005 response to Togo’s coup and the Peace and Security Council’s (PSC) and AU’s refusal to allow Togo to participate in its activities).
20. MARSHALL, supra note 17.
21. Williams, supra note 14, at 272; see also Thomas Legler & Thomas Kwasi Tiek, What Difference Can a Path Make? Regional Democracy Promotion Regimes in the Americas and Africa, 17 DEMOCRATIZATION 465, 469–70 (2010) (describing the measures Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim adopted to respond to the events in Sierra Leone).
24. Id. ¶ (b).
25. See JOHN M. KABIA, HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN WEST AFRICA: FROM ECOMOG TO ECOMIL 103–35 (2009) (recounting ECOMOG’s humanitarian intervention in Sierra Leone from 1997 to 2000); see also Laggah et al., supra note 22, at 184–88 (providing an analysis of this intervention).
Assembly adopted the Declaration on a Framework for Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government (the Lomé Declaration). In the Lomé Declaration, the OAU Assembly set out a new approach to coups:

We express our grave concern about the resurgence of coup d’etat in Africa. We recognize that these developments are a threat to peace and security of the Continent and they constitute a very disturbing trend and serious set back to the ongoing process of democratization in the Continent . . . We reaffirm that coups are sad and unacceptable developments in our Continent, coming at a time when our people have committed themselves to respect of the rule of law based on peoples’ will expressed through the ballot and not the bullet.

As Paul Williams observed, the OAU’s commitment was especially noteworthy because many of the OAU’s member state governments themselves assumed power through military coups.

The Lomé Declaration defined several situations that constitute an unconstitutional change of government:

i) a military coup d’état against a democratically elected Government;

ii) intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected Government;

iii) replacement of a democratically elected Government by armed dissident groups and rebel movements;

iv) the refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party after free, fair and regular elections.

The Lomé Declaration provided a variety of sanctions that could be taken incrementally in response to unconstitutional change. In the initial stage, the OAU would condemn the coup and refuse to recognize the government. Next, the perpetrators would be...

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29. Lomé Declaration, supra note 28.


31. Lomé Declaration, supra note 28; see also OAU Decision on Unconstitutional Changes of Government, supra note 28 (restricting the definition of unconstitutional changes of government to paragraphs (B)(i)–(iv) of the “Framework for an OAU Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government”).

32. Lomé Declaration, supra note 28.

33. Id.
given up to six months to restore constitutional order, during which time the unconstitutional government would be suspended from OAU policy organs. After the six-month period, the OAU could impose targeted sanctions, including visa denials, restrictions on government-to-government contacts, and trade restrictions.

The primary responsibility for implementing the Lomé Declaration belonged to the Central Organ of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, and Resolution. Thereafter, the Central Organ systematically condemned the successful coups that took place in the Central African Republic (CAR) (2003), Guinea Bissau (2003), and São Tomé and Príncipe (2003).

B. The Current African Union Treaties

In the 1990s, the OAU’s failure to guarantee peace and security led many to question the organization’s suitability to the circumstances of Africa at the time. In 1999, at an extraordinary meeting in Sirte, Libya, the OAU Assembly proposed the replacement of the OAU by what became the African Union. In a meeting in Lomé from July 10 to 12, 2000, the OAU Assembly adopted the Constitutive Act of the AU, which entered into force on May 26, 2001, after ratification by two-thirds of the member states of the OAU. A transition period of two years was

34. Id.
35. Id.
36. Id.
40. AU Constitutive Act, supra note 5, arts. 28, 33(1); OAU Ass., Decision on the Establishment of the African Union and the Pan-African Parliament, 36th
allowed.\textsuperscript{41} As a result, although the AU was formally established in July 2002, the OAU continued to exist until July 2003.\textsuperscript{42} By then, all fifty-three OAU member states—every state in Africa other than Morocco—ratified the Constitutive Act.\textsuperscript{43}

1. Organs and Powers

In the field of peace and security, the key AU body is the Peace and Security Council (the PSC), which was established by the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (the PSC Protocol).\textsuperscript{44} The PSC Protocol was adopted pursuant to Article 5(2) of the AU Constitutive Act and entered into effect on December 26, 2003, after the deposit of instruments of ratification by a majority of the member states of the AU.\textsuperscript{45} The PSC formally launched on March 25, 2004, at which point the peace and security responsibilities of the Central Organ of the AU—including responsibilities under the


\textsuperscript{43} Morocco withdrew from the OAU in 1985 after the admission of Western Sahara (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic), which Morocco regards as part of its territory. Gregory W. White, \textit{The "End of the Era of Leniency" in Morocco}, in \textit{NORTH AFRICA, POLITICS, REGION, AND THE LIMITS OF TRANSFORMATION}, 90, 95 (Yahia H. Zoubir & Haizam Amirah-Fernández eds., 2008).


The Lomé Declaration—came to an end. By February 2010, the PSC Protocol had fifty signatories and forty-four ratifications. The PSC has fifteen members, all of whom are chosen by the Executive Council on the basis of equitable regional representation and rotation. One of the criteria for choosing prospective states is “respect for constitutional governance, in accordance with the Lomé Declaration, as well as the rule of law and human rights.” Each PSC member has one vote. Where the PSC fails to reach a consensus, a two-thirds majority is required on substantive matters. The PSC acts on behalf of all AU members. PSC decisions are binding, and the Protocol provides that member states “agree to accept and implement the decisions of the [PSC]” and “extend full cooperation to, and facilitate action by the Peace and Security Council” in performing its duties in the “prevention, management and resolution of crises and conflicts . . . .”

Although the Protocol provides the mechanism for the implementation of the principles in the AU Constitutive Act, it is a separate treaty. Despite this distinction, the PSC practice has been to impose measures and sanctions against any member state in which a coup occurs, even if the nation has not ratified the Protocol. As an example, the PSC imposed sanctions on Mauritania in 2005 even though it had not ratified the Protocol (Mauritania signed in May 2003 and ratified in July 2008). The PSC then imposed sanctions on Guinea in 2009 (Guinea signed in July 2002, and has yet to ratify). One argument supporting the PSC position is that these states were bound by their signature not to undermine the Protocol. Alternatively, it could be argued

47. States that have not ratified are the Central African Republic, Cape Verde (not signed), Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea (not signed), Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Liberia, Seychelles, and Somalia. List of Countries Acceded to the PSC Protocol, supra note 45.
48. Members are chosen on the basis of equitable regional representation and rotation: ten members are elected for a period of three years; five members are elected for a period of two years each. PSC Protocol, supra note 44, art. 5(2).
49. Id. art. 5(2)(g).
50. Id. art. 8(12).
51. Id. art. 8(13).
52. Id. art. 7(2).
53. Id. arts. 7(3)–(4); see generally Paul D. Williams, The Peace and Security Council of the African Union: Evaluating an Embryonic International Institution, 47 J. MOD. AFR. STUD. 603, 603 (2009) (examining how the PSC is attempting to bring security to Africa).
54. See infra Part III.2–3 discussing the cases of Mauritania and Guinea.

A State is obliged to refrain from acts which would defeat the object and purpose of a treaty when:
that the PSC is simply the mechanism through which the AU responds to unconstitutional acts that are prohibited by the Constitutive Act, which all member states have ratified.\textsuperscript{56}

The AU Assembly, which is made up of the Heads of State and Government of the member states or their representatives, also has significant powers in the peace and security field.\textsuperscript{57} Its decisions are made by consensus, or if a consensus cannot be reached, by a two-thirds majority vote.\textsuperscript{58} A key power of the Assembly is to impose sanctions, under Article 23(1)–(2) of the Constitutive Act, on member states who fail to comply with the decisions and policies of the AU.\textsuperscript{59} These sanctions include the denial of “transport and communications links with other member states, and other measures of a political and economic nature to be determined by the Assembly.”\textsuperscript{60} This is the only sanctioning power against unconstitutional changes of government conferred on the Assembly by the Constitutive Act.

In addition, the role of the AU Commission (the Secretariat) in this area should be recognized. In theory, the PSC powers in Article 7 of the Protocol are to be exercised “in conjunction with the Chairperson of the Commission.”\textsuperscript{61} In practice, the Chairperson of the Commission implements the decisions of the PSC and the AU Assembly and acts with the PSC in imposing sanctions under the PSC Protocol.\textsuperscript{62} Typically, the Chair immediately issues a statement condemning any unconstitutional change of government that occurs.\textsuperscript{63} The PSC then suspends the offending state and directs the Commission to facilitate the return

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\textsuperscript{57} AU Constitutive Act, supra note 5, art. 6.

\textsuperscript{58} Id. art. 7.

\textsuperscript{59} Id. art. 23(1)–(2).

\textsuperscript{60} Id. art. 23(2).

\textsuperscript{61} PSC Protocol, supra note 44, art. 7(1).

\textsuperscript{62} Id. arts. 7, 10.

to constitutional order.\footnote{See H.E. Jean Ping, AUC Chairperson, Opening Remarks on the Occasion of the First Annual US-African Union High Level Meeting (Apr. 21, 2010) (explaining the protocol in which the PSC directs the Commission to facilitate a return to constitutional order).} This process typically involves assisting in the organization of the mediation and negotiation process and setting up International Contact Groups.\footnote{Id.}

2. Unconstitutional Change: Definitions and Responses

Several provisions in the introductory articles to the African Union’s Constitutive Act condemn unconstitutional changes of government. Article 3(g) obligates the AU to “[p]romote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance . . . .”\footnote{AU Constitutive Act, supra note 5, art. 3(g); see generally Thomas Kwasi Tieku, Multilateralization of Democracy Promotion and Defense in Africa, 56 AFR. TODAY 75 (2009) (discussing the promotion of democratic ideals in the reformed AU).} The Constitutive Act’s list of “principles,” set out in Article 4, includes “[r]espect for democratic principles, human rights, the rule of law and good governance,” “condemnation and rejection of impunity and political assassination,” and the “[c]ondemnation and rejection of unconstitutional changes of governments.”\footnote{Id. art. 4(g).} Moreover, although Article 4(g) of the Constitutive Act affirms the principle of noninterference by member states in the internal affairs of other member states, this restriction does not expressly cover the AU itself.\footnote{Id. art. 4(g).} This omission opens up the possibility of AU action against a regime which has come to power by unconstitutional means.

Article 4(j) of the Constitutive Act allows member states to request intervention “in order to restore peace and security,” and the AU Assembly must authorize action.\footnote{Id. art. 4(j).} It is clear from this provision that a recognized government can request intervention in its own state in the event of a coup. However, Article 4(j) does not expressly exclude the possibility that the government of one state could request intervention in another state if a coup poses a threat to peace and security in the other state. When a member state requests intervention by the AU, PSC approval is not required.\footnote{PSC Protocol, supra note 44, art. 7(1)(e).} Instead, the AU Assembly authorizes the action, and then the PSC approves the modalities for intervention.\footnote{Id. art. 7(1)(f).}

In addition, if read together, the Constitutive Act and the PSC Protocol provide for sanctions against a member state whose government has come to power by unconstitutional means. Article 30 of the Constitutive Act provides for suspension:
“Governments which shall come to power through unconstitutional means shall not be allowed to participate in the activities of the Union.”72 The principle in Article 30 is given effect by Article 7(1)(g) of the PSC Protocol, which gives the PSC the power to “institute sanctions whenever an unconstitutional change of Government takes place in a Member State, as provided for in the Lomé Declaration . . . .”73 As discussed earlier, the Lomé Declaration both provides a definition of situations that constitute unconstitutional change and establishes a list of incremental measures, including suspension of the state’s government from (now) AU bodies and targeted sanctions against members of the government.74

Finally, under Article 4(h) the AU has the right to intervene—including by military means—in a member state “in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.”75 Procedurally, the PSC first recommends action under Article 4(h) to the Assembly, and then, after a decision by the Assembly, the PSC adopts the modalities for intervention.76 A planned amendment, set out in a Protocol in 2003, would add “a serious threat to legitimate order” to the definition of “grave circumstances,” which could lead to intervention.77 However, the Protocol does not provide a definition of “serious threat” or “legitimate order.” The most coherent approach within the AU system would be to interpret these terms in line with the unconstitutional change provisions of the Lomé Declaration. This interpretation would enable the AU to take military action against unconstitutional seizures of government from within a state and reinstate the constitutional government. The amendment will come into force after two-thirds of AU member states deposit instruments of ratification, but as of February 2010, only twenty-five states (less than half of the membership) had done so.78

72. AU Constitutive Act, supra note 5, art. 30.
73. PSC Protocol, supra note 44, art. 7(1)(g).
74. See supra Part IIA (discussing the Lomé Declaration).
75. AU Constitutive Act, supra note 5, art. 4(h).
76. PSC Protocol, supra note 44, art. 7(1)(e)–(f).

On January 30, 2007, the AU Assembly adopted the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Good Governance (the Charter). The Charter will come into effect when the instruments of ratification are deposited by fifteen member states. By July 2010, only three states (Ethiopia, Mauritania, and Sierra Leone) had done so. Despite this low level of ratification, the Charter is significant because it demonstrates the desire within the AU to strengthen the legal framework applicable to unconstitutional changes of government. If adopted, it would give treaty effect to the Lomé Declaration while expanding it in several respects.

In particular, Article 23(5) of the Charter provides a new definition of circumstances that are “illegal means of accessing or maintaining power.” It includes all of the unconstitutional scenarios listed in the Lomé Declaration definition and adds a new scenario: “Any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government.”

The Charter also would give the PSC two new powers to act to maintain constitutional order. First, Article 24 gives the PSC the power to act where a situation arises that might affect a state’s democratic political institutional arrangements or its legitimate exercise of power. Although the coverage of this article is somewhat uncertain, it appears to enable AU military intervention to protect democratic political institutions or legitimate governments. Second, where an unconstitutional change has occurred and “diplomatic initiatives have failed,” Article 25(1) states that the PSC “shall” immediately suspend the state in question from participation in AU activities, in accordance with Article 30 of the AU Constitutive Act, and

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80. Id. arts. 47–48.
82. African Charter on Democracy, supra note 7, art. 23.
83. Id. art. 23(5).
84. Id. art. 24.

When a situation arises in a State Party that may affect its democratic political institutional arrangements or the legitimate exercise of power, the Peace and Security Council shall exercise its responsibilities in order to maintain the constitutional order in accordance with relevant provisions of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union.
initiate sanctions, in accordance with Article 7(g) of the PSC Protocol. 85

The Charter’s measures for dealing with unconstitutional change are broader than those in the Lomé Declaration, the AU Constitutive Act, and the PSC Protocol. Under Article 25 of the Charter on Democracy, “perpetrators of unconstitutional change of government shall not be allowed to participate in elections held to restore the democratic order or hold any position of responsibility in political institutions of their State.” 86 Article 25 also provides that the perpetrators of unconstitutional change “may . . . be tried before the competent court” of the AU itself. 87 Although the Charter fails to specify the offense that perpetrators of unconstitutional change would be charged with, it appears that unconstitutional change is classed as a “crime against democracy.” At present, the “competent court” would presumably be the African Court of Justice (ACJ), which, to date, has not heard any cases. 88 If a proposed merger between the ACJ and the African Court of Human and People’s Rights proceeds, the court in question would be the African Court of Justice and Human Rights (ACJHR). 89 The Charter also bars states from providing sanctuary to perpetrators of unconstitutional change. 90 Rather, it applies the aut dedere aut judicare principle and obliges state parties either to bring perpetrators to justice or to extradite them. 91

Under the Charter on Democracy, the AU Assembly would have the power to impose additional sanctions, including punitive economic measures against the perpetrators of unconstitutional change. 92 The AU Assembly could impose sanctions on “any Member State that is proved to have instigated or supported unconstitutional change of government in another state.” 93

85. Id. art. 25(1); PSC Protocol, supra note 44, art. 7(g).
86. African Charter on Democracy, supra note 7, art. 25(4).
87. Id. art. 25(5).
90. African Charter on Democracy, supra note 7, art. 25(8).
91. Id. art. 25(9).
92. Id. art. 25(7).
93. Id. art. 25(6).
Although the Charter does not specify the types of sanctions that could be imposed, the allowable sanctions would presumably be limited to those provided for under Article 23(2) of the Constitutive Act. As discussed earlier, these include the denial of “transport and communications links with other Member States, and other measures of a political and economic nature.”\footnote{AU Constitutive Act, supra note 5, art. 23(2).} The PSC would have the power to lift sanctions, but only after the situation had been resolved.\footnote{African Charter on Democracy, supra note 7, art. 26.}

If it comes into force, the Charter on Democracy will enhance the AU's ability to combat unconstitutional change. Although it is unclear why states have so far proved unwilling to ratify the Charter, the member states of the AU continue to reiterate their commitment to an enhanced response to unconstitutional change.\footnote{See, e.g.,\footnote{AU Ass., Tripoli Declaration on the Elimination of Conflicts in Africa and the Promotion of Sustainable Peace, Special Sess., Doc. No. SP/Assembly/PS/Decl. (I), ¶¶ 8, 11–12 (Aug. 3, 2009), http://www.africa-union.org/root/ua/Conferences/2009/09/Summit81/Report/Declaration%20on%20Peace%20%20Security%20%20Final%20Eng.pdf (noting the resurgence of unconstitutional change, rejecting it, and undertaking to enhance prevention of and response to unconstitutional changes).} In particular, the AU Assembly issued a decision on February 2, 2010, stating that:

[In cases of unconstitutional changes of Government, in addition to the suspension of the country concerned, the following measures shall apply:] a. non-participation of the perpetrators of the unconstitutional change in the elections held to restore constitutional order;
    b. implementation of sanctions against any Member State that is proved to have instigated or supported an unconstitutional change in another State;

The decision also stated that AU member states should not recognize unconstitutional regimes and called on international organizations not to accredit them.\footnote{Id. ¶ 6(i)(6).} Unless and until the Charter on Democracy comes into effect, however, the legal foundation for this approach will continue to lie in Article 23(2) of the AU Constitutive Act.

III. THE AFRICAN UNION PRACTICE ON COUPS D'ÉTAT

The previous Part showed the development of OAU and AU powers in respect to unconstitutional changes of government.
This Part considers the actions taken by the AU with respect to *coup d'état* since the PSC came into being in March 2004. It looks at the AU response to the successful *coup*s in Togo (February 2005), Mauritania (August 2005 and August 2008), Guinea (December 2008), Madagascar (March 2009), and Niger (February 2010). When responding to *coup*s, the AU has consistently favored the constitutional order, irrespective of the conduct of incumbent regimes, the claims made by those challenging them, or the likelihood that the *coup* might advance democracy. As a result, the AU’s actions have generally protected incumbent governments.

1. Togo (2005)

The President of Togo, General Gnassingbé Eyadéma, came to power in a *coup* in 1967. A multiparty constitution was introduced in 1992, and he then secured office in 1993, 1998, and 2003 in elections that were widely criticized as unfair. He died on February 5, 2005, after thirty-eight years in office.

According to the provisions of the Togolese Constitution of 1992, as amended in December 2002, he should have been succeeded by the President of the National Assembly (Fambaré Natchaba Ouattara) for an interim period not exceeding sixty days, during which an election would be held. However, Faure Gnassingbé, the son of Gnassingbé Eyadéma, was installed as President of Togo in a *coup* by the Togolese Armed Forces. The army justified its actions on the grounds that Ouattara was out of the country; in reality, he had been prevented from returning to Togo by the army’s closure of all Togolese borders.

The National Assembly, dominated by members of the Rally of the Togolese People, the party to which both Gnassingbé Eyadéma and Faure Gnassingbé belonged, attempted to legitimize Faure Gnassingbé’s position as President of Togo. As Adewale Banjo observed, this was probably done out of concern for the possible AU response to

99. See NUGENT, supra note 1, at 391 (describing Eyadéma’s electoral victories in 1993, 1998, and 2003 as the result of the disqualification of opposition candidates, improper vote counting, and other undemocratic tactics).


102. Banjo, supra note 100, at 151.


104. Banjo, supra note 100, at 151.
the military coup. On February 6, 2005, the National Assembly voted to appoint Faure Gnassingbé and remove Ouattara as President of the National Assembly. It also amended the Constitution to allow the new President to continue in office without organizing an election until the end of the mandate of Gnassingbé Eyadéma in 2008.

Togo ratified the PSC Protocol in February 2004. Consequently, there was no doubt as to the PSC’s power to take action against the coup. On February 7, 2005, the PSC condemned both the military coup and what it termed “the constitutional modifications intended to legally window dress the coup d’état.” It classed the succession as a violation of both the Togolese Constitution and AU instruments, and it threatened to impose sanctions under Article 7(g) of the PSC Protocol and the Lomé Declaration unless the constitutional order was rapidly restored. On February 9, 2005, in conjunction with ECOWAS (the sub-regional grouping to which Togo belongs), the PSC again demanded that the succession be conducted according to the provisions of the Constitution.

On February 24, the Togolese National Assembly restored the constitutional provisions requiring elections to be held within sixty days, but did not require Faure Gnassingbé to step down as President of Togo for the interim period. The AU and ECOWAS found Faure Gnassingbé’s insistence on remaining in office to be a continuation of his illegal seizure of power. As a result, on February 25, the AU confirmed its suspension of Togo from AU activities until the restoration of constitutional order, rejected “any election that would be organized under the conditions enunciated by the de facto authorities in Togo,” required the resignation of Faure Gnassingbé, and endorsed the

105. Id.
106. Id.
108. List of Countries Acceded to PSC Protocol, supra note 45.
111. This course of action was agreed to during the ECOWAS Extraordinary Summit, held in Niamey on February 9, 2005, and attended by Olusegun Obansanjo of Nigeria, AU Chairperson, and Alpha Konare, AUC Chairperson. Brief on Togo, supra note 103, ¶ 11.
113. Brief on Togo, supra note 103, ¶ 20.
sanctions (an arms embargo and a travel ban on leaders) that ECOWAS imposed on February 19, 2005. Most significantly, the AU directed ECOWAS to “take all such measures as it deem[ed] necessary to restore constitutional legality in Togo within the shortest time.” Essentially, the AU ordered ECOWAS to take military action to enforce a change of government, as the OAU had done in Sierra Leone in 1997.

Under the weight of this pressure and other international criticism, Faure Gnassingbé resigned his position of President of Togo on February 25, 2005, and handed over power to an interim administration, in which Abass Bonfob—previously a vice president of the National Assembly—became the new President of the Assembly and the acting President of Togo. This development alone was sufficient for ECOWAS—but not the AU—to accept that there had been “a full return to constitutional legality,” and it lifted its sanctions “with immediate effect” from February 26, 2005.

The commitment of the regional and sub-regional organizations to democracy and genuine elections was tested when Faure Gnassingbé won the presidential election held on April 24, 2005. The credibility of this election was disputed by the opposition, the Union des Forces du Changement (UFC), and


117. See id. at 812–13 (citing several examples of international condemnation).

118. See, e.g., Togo’s President to Resign, supra note 114.


by international observers, including the European Parliament. Paul Simon Handy argues that ECOWAS preferred political continuity through Gnassingbé Eyadema’s son to political change in the form of known radical opposition leaders. The dispute over the “stolen election” triggered violence in Togo. As a result, several hundred died, thousands were wounded, 15,000–16,000 were internally displaced, and 40,000 fled to neighboring states. Despite these problems, the technical conditions set for a restoration to constitutional order had been met. On May 27, 2005, the PSC lifted its ban, and the Togolese authorities were allowed to participate in AU activities.

However, Togo continues to be politically unstable. Faure Gnassingbé won a second presidential term in elections held on March 4, 2010. As in 2005, the validity of the results was disputed domestically but accepted by ECOWAS and the AU, and protesters took to the streets. In an attempt to resolve the political crisis, the government and the leader of the UFC formed a coalition government on May 28, 2010. The coalition government has proven unpopular with the majority of UFC voters.
members, and the UFC members have continued to challenge the legitimacy of Faure Gnassingbé’s election.\textsuperscript{129}

In the case of Togo, the AU showed its unwillingness to accept a civilian government that came to power through a military coup. Its action against the coup proved effective in that it restored constitutional order through a presidential election. However, the election led to the validation of the coup, and Faure Gnassingbé was confirmed as President. There would be a similar outcome in Mauritania, the next country in which the AU opposed a coup.


In Mauritania, Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya came to power in 1984 as head of a military junta. In 1991, Mauritania adopted a new constitution that required multiparty democracy, with presidential elections to be held every six years.\textsuperscript{130} Taya was then elected as President in 1992 (with 62 percent of the vote), reelected in 1997 (with 90 percent of the vote), and again in 2003 (with 67 percent of the vote).\textsuperscript{131} The main opposition parties called the credibility of each of these elections into question, and they went so far as to boycott the election held in 1997.\textsuperscript{132} Though supposedly a democratic state, the ruling party—through arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, and torture of opposition candidates, and the banning of several opposition parties—circumscribed the citizens’ capacity to change the government.\textsuperscript{133}

On August 3, 2005, Taya was removed from power in a bloodless coup led by Colonel Ely Ould Vall and Colonel Mohamed Ould Aziz.\textsuperscript{134} The new military regime reportedly promised to hold power for no more than two years, during which they intended to prepare and put in place genuine democratic


\textsuperscript{130} MAURITANIA CONSTITUTION arts. 11, 26 (1991).


\textsuperscript{132} Incumbent Declared Winner in Mauritania Vote; Opposition Boycotts, ASSOCIATED PRESS, Dec. 14, 1997.

\textsuperscript{133} See Boubacar NDiaye, Mauritania, August 2005: Justice and Democracy, or Just Another Coup?, 105 APR. AFF. 421 (2006); 21 U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT TO CONGRESS 173, 174, 177–78 (1996) (discussing political and other extrajudicial killing and general political rights in Mauritania); 17 U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT TO CONGRESS 162, 162–65 (1992) (discussing political killings, disappearances, and torture); 16 U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT TO CONGRESS 239, 242, 246 (1991) (discussing arbitrary arrests and political rights).

institutions. The coup was popular, and thousands of people demonstrated in support. The PSC responded swiftly to the 2005 coup, even though it took no action during Taya’s office and Mauritania had not ratified the PSC Protocol. On August 4, it condemned the unconstitutional change of government and suspended Mauritania from participating in AU activities until constitutional order had been restored. As Paul Williams observed, the AU was obliged to “condemn the coup d’état in principle” even though it was aware of the “significant local support” and “international sympathy” for the coup. Within a month of the coup, the PSC was aware that the “new Mauritanian authorities” were taking firm steps likely to “consolidate democracy and the rule of law” within the state, but the suspension remained in place. Despite the suspension, the military junta pushed forward with its democratic agenda. A referendum on June 25, 2006, made changes to the Constitution that limited the powers of the President and set a limit of two five-year terms for each President. In March 2007, the junta held genuine democratic elections, which Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi won. Following this election, the AU removed Mauritania’s suspension.

General Mohamed Ould Aziz headed a military junta that launched a second coup in Mauritania on August 6, 2008. The junta arrested President Sidi and transferred the office of President to Aziz. Although the junta claimed that the regime was corrupt and that they needed to save Mauritanian democracy,


138. Williams, supra note 14, at 274.


it is significant that the coup came hours after the announcement of a presidential decree to remove the top four military officers, including Aziz, from their positions. On the same day, the majority of the members of Parliament issued a statement in support of the coup. On August 7, 2008, the junta promised to organize free and transparent presidential elections.

On September 22, 2008, the PSC responded by demanding a return to legitimate constitutional order in Mauritania through the reinstatement of Sidi as President. It urged AU member states and the international community to reject, as illegitimate and illegal, the activities and initiatives of the new regime. In its decision, the PSC drew authority from the Lomé Declaration, the AU Constitutive Act, the PSC Protocol, and the African Charter on Democracy. The PSC Protocol and the African Charter on Democracy were ratified by Mauritania on July 7, 2008, less than a month before the second coup.

After these events, there followed a protracted stand-off between the AU and the Aziz government. Aziz initially called the AU’s demands “unrealistic” and against the best interests of the Mauritanian people. The Aziz government eventually released Sidi from house arrest on December 21, 2008, but the next day the PSC warned the Mauritanian authorities that this gesture was insufficient to fulfill its requirements. On January 23, 2009, the junta announced its plans for elections in June 2009. However, despite this announcement, at its meeting held February 1–3, 2009, the AU Assembly gave its support to the

146. See Mauritanian Parliamentarians Back Military Coup, BBC MONITORING INT’L REPS., Aug. 6, 2008 (quoting Mauritanian TV (television broadcast Aug. 6, 2008)).
149. Id. ¶ 8.
150. Id. ¶ 4.
151. Id. ¶ 4. Mauritania deposited instruments of ratification for these on July 28, 2008.
On February 6, 2009, the PSC imposed sanctions on Mauritania, including “visa denials, travel restrictions and freezing of assets, to all individuals, both civilian and military, whose activities are designed to maintain the unconstitutional status quo in Mauritania.” Aziz’s next move was to resign as Head of State on April 21, 2009 and to stand as a civilian candidate in the elections planned for June 6.

A resolution to the crisis followed negotiations brokered by the International Contact Group on Mauritania, led by the AU, and facilitated by Abdoulaye Wade, President of Senegal. These negotiations led to a framework agreement that was signed by the Aziz faction, the coalition of anti-coup parties, the Front National Pour la Defense de la Defense de la Democratie, and the opposition party, the Rassemblement des Forces. Under the terms of the agreement, Sidi returned to head a transitional government made up of civilians and the soldiers that had toppled him; he then renounced his mandate as Head of State on June 28, 2009. Additionally, the elections were postponed until July 18, 2009, to give the opposition time to field their candidates. These efforts were sufficient to lead to the lifting, on July 1, 2009, of Mauritania’s suspension from the AU and relevant sanctions. Aziz won the election and was sworn in as civilian President in August 2009, and remains in office at the time of writing.

Two lessons may be drawn from the case of Mauritania. The first, which is shown by the events of 2005 to 2007, is that coups need not be antidemocratic, but may instead make free and fair
elections more likely. The second lesson, which may be drawn from the 2008 coup and is also evident in the coup in Togo, is that an election may be used to validate the results of a coup. As discussed below, after the events in Mauritania from 2008 to 2009, the AU began to discourage the beneficiaries of coups from standing in elections intended to restore constitutional government.


President Lansana Conte, an autocratic ruler who staged his own coup in 1984 and ruled Guinea for twenty-four years, died on December 23, 2008. On December 23, 1990, Guinea adopted a constitution paving the way to civilian government, and Conte went on to win elections in 1993, 1998, and 2003. Conte was intolerant of challengers: opposition leaders operated in a climate of fear and intimidation, and the 2003 election was boycotted by the opposition. Under Article 34 of the 1990 Guinean Constitution, the President of the National Assembly (Aboubacar Sompare) should have acted as President of the country for a period not exceeding ninety days after Conte’s death, during which time elections would be held. However, within hours of Conte’s death, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara led a military coup. The military regime suspended the Constitution and promised that elections would be held by the end of 2010. The coup was popular among the citizens because impunity, corruption, drug trafficking, and insecurity had been undermining the country’s institutions.

The AU responded swiftly to the military coup, even though the AU took no action during Conte’s office and Guinea did not ratify the PSC Protocol. On December 29, 2008, the PSC suspended Guinea from the activities of the AU until the return of constitutional order, which meant succession as set out in the Constitution and elections within ninety days.

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164. See Williams, supra note 14, at 274 (describing Mauritania’s bloodless coup in positive terms as promoting, rather than undermining, democracy).
165. See FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC OF GUINEA [CONSTITUTION].
166. See NUGENT, supra note 1, at 396 (giving background on Conte and his regime).
169. Id.
170. Id.
suspended Guinea from all meetings until constitutional
democracy was restored.\textsuperscript{172} On January 30, 2009, the
International Contact Group on Guinea, which was established on
the initiative of the AU and ECOWAS, endorsed a requirement
that the Guinean stakeholders complete the transitional process
through the organization of free, fair, and transparent elections in
2009.\textsuperscript{173} The contact group also endorsed prohibiting members of the
military regime and the transitional government from participating in the 2009 elections.\textsuperscript{174}

Initially, Camara announced a provisional timetable for a
return to constitutional order on the terms required by the AU
and ECOWAS.\textsuperscript{175} By July 10, 2009, however, it became apparent
that Camara was unwilling to honor his commitment, and the
PSC expressed its "concern at the lack of significant progress
towards the restoration of constitutional order" and "the holding
of legislative and presidential elections in 2009."\textsuperscript{176} On August
17, 2009, Camara announced that the presidential elections would
take place on January 31, 2010, and that he might run for
office.\textsuperscript{177} On September 28, 2009, the regime's soldiers fired on
unarmed civilians taking part in a peaceful demonstration against
Camara's candidacy.\textsuperscript{178} At least 156 people were killed; more
than 1,000 were wounded; at least 109 women were subjected to
sexual violence, including rapes and sexual mutilations; and
opposition leaders were attacked and their homes looted.\textsuperscript{179} The
UN Commission of Inquiry, which looked into these events, concluded
that there was evidence of violations of human rights and crimes against humanity, and that these violations were part of a widespread and systematic pattern of violence against the
The AU sanctions, which included “travel restrictions and freezing of assets” against members of the junta and individuals supporting the activities of the junta, also seemed to have little effect. A December 3, 2009, assassination attempt on Camara dramatically changed the situation because it forced Camara to seek emergency treatment in Morocco, and from there he went into voluntary exile. After the assassination attempt, Brigadier-General Sekouba Konate, a member of the military junta, became Acting Head of State and entered into negotiations with opposition groups, supported by the AU and ECOWAS. These negotiations led to the signing, on January 15, 2010, of the Joint Declaration of Ouagadougou, which established a framework for transition and barred, inter alia, members of the military junta, members of the transitional government, and members of the Defense and Security Forces in active service from participating in the presidential elections. The opposition leader, Jean Marie Dore, was appointed civilian Prime Minister on January 26, 2010, to lead the transition and make preparations for elections scheduled for June 27, 2010. The elections, which took place in June, are generally accepted to have been free and fair. However, a presidential run-off election scheduled for July 2010 has been postponed indefinitely amidst allegations of voter fraud.

The case of Guinea shows the evolution of the AU policy against coups. Whereas its response to the coups in Togo and Mauritania allowed a coup outcome to be validated, on this occasion, the AU’s support of mediation was instrumental in barring members of the junta from the election of June 2010. It is
significant that it was during the events in Guinea that the AU Assembly adopted its Decision of February 2, 2010, not to allow perpetrators of unconstitutional change to participate in elections held to restore constitutional order.\textsuperscript{188} While the AU, so far, has not been successful in achieving a return to constitutional government in Guinea, its policy prevented the legitimization of the coup of 2008.


The AU adopted a similar approach to the coup in Madagascar in 2009, where the situation was akin to Guinea. On March 17, 2009, under pressure from the army and the civilian opposition, President Ravalomanana resigned and transferred power to the military directorate.\textsuperscript{189} The military directorate transferred presidential authority to Andry Rajoelina, the mayor of Antananarivo, the capital city.\textsuperscript{190} At age thirty-four, Rajoelina was six years too young to be President under the Malagasy Constitution.\textsuperscript{191} Additionally, in the event of a resignation, the Constitution required an election to be held for a new President.\textsuperscript{192} In the interim period, presidential powers should have resided in the President of the Senate.\textsuperscript{193} Despite these problems, Rajoelina received the support of the Constitutional Court.\textsuperscript{194} He promised elections within two years.\textsuperscript{195}

Madagascar ratified the PSC Protocol in June 2004,\textsuperscript{196} thus providing a clear basis for action by the PSC. On March 17, 2009, the PSC demanded scrupulous compliance with the provisions of the Malagasy Constitution.\textsuperscript{197} Accordingly, the PSC declared that the transfer of power to the military directorate was a violation of the Malagasy Constitution. It also declared that the decision to

\textsuperscript{188} See supra Part II.C (discussing the ratification of the Charter on Democracy and the AU Assembly’s decision of Feb. 2, 2010).
\textsuperscript{189} Sebastien Berger, Opposition Leader Takes Power in Madagascar, DAILY TELEGRAPH (London), Mar. 18, 2009, at 18.
\textsuperscript{190} See id. (noting that Rajoelina, the thirty-four-year-old mayor, had taken control of the government).
\textsuperscript{191} See MADAGASCAR CONSTITUTION art. 46 (1992) (saying that one must be forty years old in order to run for President).
\textsuperscript{192} Id. arts. 47, 52.
\textsuperscript{193} Id. art. 52.
\textsuperscript{196} List of Countries Acceded to the PSC Protocol, supra note 45.
confer presidential authority on Rajoelina amounted to an unconstitutional change of government. In accordance with its powers, the PSC suspended Madagascar from AU activities until the restoration of constitutional order and threatened to impose sanctions if that did not occur. The Southern African Development Community (SADC), the sub-regional grouping to which Madagascar belongs, also suspended Madagascar, but the SADC seemed to have different requirements than the AU.

Under the auspices of the AU and the International Joint Mediation Team, mediation talks were held between the four political groupings led by Ravalomanana, Rajoelina, and two former Presidents of Madagascar, Didier Ratsiraka and Albert Zafy. These talks led to the signing of the Maputo Agreements of August 8–9, 2009, and the Addis Ababa Additional Act of November 6, 2009. These agreements provided for power-sharing during a transition to constitutional order by November 2010, during which period elections would be held, and members of the transition government would be barred from participating in these elections. In December 2009, following an impasse between the political groupings, Rajoelina withdrew from the talks and announced that he would instead unilaterally organize elections in March 2010. In February 2010, the PSC threatened to impose targeted sanctions on the regime and its supporters if Rajoelina’s regime did not comply with the agreements entered into by the political groupings. After Rajoelina failed to change his behavior, on March 17, 2010, the

199. Id. ¶ 4.
203. AU et al., supra note 201.
AU imposed sanctions in the form of visa restrictions and the freezing of financial assets in foreign banks. In response to this pressure, on May 12, 2010, Rajoelina announced that he would not stand for election to the presidency and presented a roadmap for a return to constitutional rule, including a referendum on the Constitution and the holding of legislative and presidential elections later in the year.

In the case of Madagascar, the actions of the AU, in addition to those of other international actors, put pressure on the regime and led to progress toward the restoration of a constitutional government. As in Togo (2005), the AU was unwilling to accept a civilian government that was the beneficiary of a coup. As in Guinea, the AU gave its support to the agreements between the stakeholders that barred the beneficiaries of a coup from a subsequent election. Here too, it is apparent that, following lessons learned in earlier coups, the AU no longer allows coups to be legitimized in that way.


Article 36 of the Niger Constitution of August 9, 1999, limited presidential term limits to two five-year periods. Mamadou Tandja was elected in 1999, and in 2004; therefore, Tandja’s period in office was due to end on December 22, 2009. Tandja, through a referendum on August 4, 2009, removed the presidential term limits from the Constitution and extended his period in office for an additional three years. Niger’s constitutional court declared that these modifications violated the 1999 Constitution. After the court decision, on May 26, 2009, Tandja dissolved Parliament and assumed emergency powers under Article 53 of the Constitution. Three days later, he dissolved the constitutional court. His actions led to national and international protests and to a constitutional crisis within the country.
ECOWAS found that the situation was unconstitutional and imposed sanctions, refusing “to support candidates presented by the Member State concerned for elective posts in the international organisations” and refusing “to organize ECOWAS meetings in the Member State concerned.” ECOWAS also threatened to suspend Niger from all ECOWAS decision making bodies and to refer the matter to the AU for similar action, unless the nation indefinitely suspended a planned legislative election scheduled for October 20, 2009, and continued the political dialogue with other leading political parties on resolving the political crisis. The PSC endorsed the ECOWAS decision on October 29, 2009, but it did not threaten specific action or suspend Niger’s membership. Instead, the PSC requested that the Chairperson of the AU Commission work closely with ECOWAS for a speedy and consensual resolution of the crisis and the democratic functioning of Niger’s institutions.

On February 18, 2010, a military coup led by Salou Djibo ousted Tandja from office. In the coup, the junta seized the President and ministers, suspended the Constitution, and stated that it wished to turn the country into “an example of democracy and of good governance.” The regime received support from the population and opposition leaders, shown through two days of demonstrations and a rally in Niamey on February 20, 2010.

Niger deposited its instrument of ratification of the PSC Protocol in August 2003. Although the PSC did not take any action following Tandja’s violation of the constitutionally mandated term limit, it immediately condemned the coup and suspended Niger from all AU activities until the country returned to constitutional order as it existed before the referendum. In requiring a return to the pre-referendum period, the PSC implicitly recognized the illegality of Tandja’s actions. The PSC’s
stance reinforced the December 2009 mediation between the Nigerien stakeholders, which was led by ECOWAS and supported by the AU.\footnote{Press Release, ECOWAS, ECOWAS Leaders Exhort Nigerien Parties to Demonstrate Flexibility in Resolving Political Crisis, Doc. No. 020/2010 (Feb. 16, 2010), available at http://news.ecowas.int/ (select “2010” from “Select a Year” drop-down menu; follow “ECOWAS Leaders Exhort Nigerien Parties to Demonstrate Flexibility in Resolving Political Crisis” hyperlink); Press Release, ECOWAS, ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council Endorses Steps to Restore Democracy in Member States, Doc. No. 0962010 (June 10, 2010), available at http://news.ecowas.int/ (select “2010” from “Select a Year” drop-down menu; follow “ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council Endorses Steps to Restore Democracy in Member States” hyperlink).} As a result, in May 2010, the coup leaders announced a transition timetable to achieve civilian rule by February 18, 2011, as well as elections from which the military would be barred.\footnote{Niger Junta Plans Polls Before Coup Anniversary, BBC NEWS, May 6, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/8665070.stm.} The coup might have paved the way for the democratic elections that were postponed by Tandja’s illegal act.

In the case of Niger, as in Mauritania from 2005 to 2007, the PSC condemned a coup that might have advanced democracy. This is problematic when the incumbent displaced by the coup was undermining democratic institutions. That said, the AU’s policy has the democratic merit of forcing the junta to promise to hold democratic elections, in which they will not participate.

IV. CONCLUSION

This Article has shown how the African Union has come to take a consistent approach to unconstitutional changes of government. Where, once, the OAU was generally indifferent to how the governments of its member states came to power, a new policy progressively has been established since the Harare Declaration in 1997. At the policy level, the key developments have been the Lomé Declaration on unconstitutional changes of government in 2000, the strengthening of the legal framework through the AU Constitutive Act (in force, 2001), and the PSC Protocol (in force, 2003). Further treaty changes are contained in the proposed African Charter on Democracy. In practice, since the PSC came into operation in early 2004, the AU bodies have sought to use their sanction powers to achieve a return to constitutional order when a coup d’état has taken place. In Togo (2005), Mauritania (2005 and 2008), Madagascar (2009), and Niger (2010), the AU’s actions contributed to an actual or planned restoration of a democratic constitutional order. Only Guinea (2008) remains without a positive outcome at the time of writing.

However, the AU’s efforts have not been uniformly successful. In Togo (2005) and Mauritania (2008), electoral endorsement of coups led to the maintenance of office by those
who took unconstitutional action. However, the AU learned from those experiences. As can be seen from its responses to the coups in Guinea, Madagascar, and Niger, those who come to power by coups can no longer expect to be permitted to take part in subsequent elections.

A second difficulty is that the AU appears unwilling to accept coups that could aid democratic development. In several cases (in Mauritania in 2005 and 2008 and in Niger), a coup had substantial domestic support, and in two cases (in Mauritania in 2005 and in Niger), a coup actually appeared likely to advance democratization. It appears that the AU policy is to systematically refuse to recognize regimes that come to power through coups, irrespective of the precise circumstances. The danger of the AU’s focus on the restoration of constitutional order is that it may shore up the position of a regime that lacks legitimacy in the eyes of its own citizens.\footnote{See Levitt, supra note 116, at 790 (noting that focusing on how a regime came to power rather than its behavior while in power may benefit bad regimes).}

Therefore, the question is whether the AU should automatically impose sanctions on all coups. Although it can be argued that the AU approach is necessary to ensure stable governance, it would be preferable if the AU adopted a more nuanced policy. For example, it might be more appropriate to grant recognition for a fixed period to a government that comes to power through a coup if the ousted regime had undermined democratic institutions and the new regime appears likely to respect those institutions. As things stand, the AU’s failure to adopt a more nuanced approach leaves it open to the criticism that it continues to protect incumbent governments rather than advance the cause of democracy on the African continent.