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Editorial: Violent transformations in Africa: coup d'état, civil wars and terrorism in the crisis of democracy

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Violent transformations in Africa: coup d'état, civil wars and terrorism in the crisis of democracy](#)

Africa is today the main geographical area of terrorism as well as of coups d'état. Since 2010, about 40 coups d'état have been carried out in Africa, in parallel with an evident regression of democracy. In 2022, according to the Report on Democracy Index elaborated by The Economist Intelligence Unit, more than 35% of all countries in the world were considered authoritarian regimes, and only 14.4% were full democracies (EIU, 2022). Among the 10 worst countries in terms of democracy, four were African and six Asian. Among the first 40 most democratic countries of the world just two are African countries: Botswana and Cape Verde.

One of the greatest problems in African politics is how to change an incumbent party and regime.

According to Ake (2000), there is a doubt regarding African crisis of democracy: it is the process of development which leads to democracy or is it the other way around? The failure of the African economic pattern weakens the ability to think and acting autonomously. Therefore, the economic, political, and cultural systems do not change. In fact, democracy in Africa tends to lose its transformative potential: It does not produce strong and stable institutions, but only "strong men".

This contradiction includes not only authoritarian regimes, such as the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea or e-Swazini; in the last few years such a tendency also increased in countries whose constitutions are formally democratic: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Conakry, and Guinea-Bissau represent only some examples of this democratic regression. Thus, when a political change becomes impossible through the instruments of the democratic game, other factors prevail. First, violence increases, particularly related to the formation of terrorist groups in various parts of the continent. The Sahel transformed itself into the most critical area for the presence of alleged Islamic terrorism; nevertheless, some scholars think that the roots of this violence

must be related to internal factors like exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination of local people rather than to the direct action of Islamic terrorist groups. Then, the dissolution of the Westphalian nation-state system in many African countries could explain an insurgency which found in an extreme idea of Islam its practical configuration (Edgerly, 2023). In a country like Mozambique, a similar process has occurred since 2017: once again, its roots have to be found in historical mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization by the central state in detriment of peripheral populations (such as Amakhuwa), which represent the majority of the Mozambican people (Bussotti and Nhaueleque, 2022); the practical impossibility, for the political oppositions, to gain regular elections against Frelimo, the incumbent party since the political independence, in 1975, represents another, important reason to explain continuous and serious manifestations of violence in that country (Leeffers and Vicente, 2017).

If political change is not possible through democratic tools, in many cases, parts of African societies manage to carry out changes in other forms. Besides terrorism, or violent riots, one of the preferred ways is the coup d'état. Generally, the position of the international community before a coup d'état is to condemn it and to ask for the restoration of the previous institutional order. There are many types of coups d'état, and it is impossible here to illustrate all their typologies; nevertheless, some of them are a response to authoritarian regimes or, in recent years (as in the case of Guinea-Conakry with Alpha Condé), to a "institutional" coup d'état. It means that the incumbent president passes constitutional reforms to extend his or, more rarely, her power beyond the limits permitted by law. Despite clear pronouncements of the African Union against the illegal extension of the presidential mandate, many African countries are facing this challenge, provoking serious institutional and social crises (Wiebusch and Murray, 2019), including democratic African countries, like Senegal. In many cases, the crisis is resolved through coups d'état.

This Research Topic of *Frontiers in Political Science* deals with violence, coups d'état and terrorism in Africa. This dossier has been focused on a critical and unconventional approach toward the subjects considered here.

Alinho, in her article, emphasizes the relation of recent and frequent coups d'état in Africa with the global crises of capitalism and democracy. Extractive capitalism in Africa accentuates a dependent development of many African countries, leading to extreme inequalities. According to these conditions, one of the solutions to overcome structural crises is the coup d'état. The example of Alinho is Guinea-Bissau and the enormous power of the military elite, between symbolic power and its involvement in illicit traffics.

Furthermore, the article written by Chin and Kirkpatrick deals with coups d'état in Africa. They analyze the 11 coups d'état, occurred or attempted, in Africa between August 2020 and November 2022. They point out that these coups could be the logical consequence of the dilemmas of democratic consolidation and endless transitions in Africa; nevertheless, in their opinion, Islamic terrorism could have played an important role in accelerating coups d'état and instability in Western Africa more than in the rest of the continent.

Jaló uses the example of Guinea-Bissau to defend his theory of a "militarized democratization". Through qualitative research, Jaló demonstrates that Guinea-Bissau is a paradigmatic example of how the armed forces were able to detain political and economic power through their military force throughout the "democratic" period of this country.

Finally, Bussotti and Coimbra write about the Mozambican case and the struggle against Islamic terrorism. In this study the authors analyze how a regional organization like SADC (Southern Africa Development Community) dealt with the risk represented by Islamic terrorism in one of its founder members, Mozambique. The weak solidarity between Mozambique and SADC demonstrates an evident lack of a common spirit, the "Sadness", before the risk of spreading terrorism all over the region. The preference for the military aid of Rwanda by the Mozambican government confirms the difficulty for a supranational organization like SADC to face common, serious problems which can affect the stability of the whole of Southeastern Africa.

As a final note, the first conclusion of the research, presented here, is the diversity of national experiences in relation to Political changes, with some regional characteristics, such as in the Sahel. Second, the social and political issues related to violence, coups and terrorism are deeper than assessed in the last decade. Furthermore, new paths must be found with a renewal of democratic and participatory institutions, inclusion of peripheral populations, promotion of equality with regard to resources and services. In addition, these paths imply the participation of other actors, such as women and local populations to the building of a democratic process. Finally, research must address more thoroughly the questions of violence, social and economic transformation, the role of the military and the international relations setting, looking at violent transformations in Africa through an analytical rather than a "politically correct" perspective.

Author contributions

LB: theoretical framework. MJ: methodology and linguistic coherence. MB: theoretical framework and cases relating to Guinea-Bissau. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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