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NOT EVERY CHANGE IS CHANGE

The Western Afrikan part of the Continent is under military rule after coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Guinea.

These countries have hardly shaken off the grip of French colonialism even after the declaration of independence in the 1960s. French colonialism cut so deep that the populations of these Afrikan countries virtually lost their indigenous languages to French - the oppressive language of their coloniser. French is generally the official language of all these "Francophone" countries in the Sahel region. France used the grand assimilationist colonial policy. This meant that France embarked on a policy to turn Afrikans in the French colonies into "French" men and women by an attempt to wipe out the Afrikan culture and replace it with the French one.

The countries under examination are so plagued by misrule, famine and poverty that any kind of change is bound to be welcome. No wonder that the recent coups have received some muted support in some quarters. In fact, the Generals who led the coups wasted no time in saying all the nice-sounding statements against the erstwhile coloniser, France.

Well, dictators are clever enough to know the plight of the people and articulate their aspirations with a view to winning them over, while lulling them into a dangerous sleep into inactivity. During this time, the dictators are cementing their rule, which tends to be much harsher than the overthrown one.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) threatened military action if the coup leaders in Niger did not surrender rule to the people. Nigeria joined the coup countries in opposition to the threatened military action. However, that deadline has come and gone with no military action in sight.

While a coup might be enticing in a desperate situation to give the people some short-lived breathing space from one dictatorship, a coup followed by military rule is seldom the best for the freedom and democracy of the people.

The way to go is always the struggle from below. That means the mass struggles of the people to take charge and shape their own destiny. Even in rare situations where the people become lucky to get a coup leader who may administer revolutionary changes, such progressive changes cannot be defended once that coup leader is removed by another coup. No matter how attractive, a change imposed from above is standing on shaky grounds if there's no people's power to harness and defend that change.

As part of the liberation movement, AZAPO was cautious about the role that was to be played by its military wing AZANLA in the liberation struggle. AZANLA was playing a supportive role to the mass struggles of the people in the form of a people's militia. That was why they were taught the principle that politics is superior to the military, whose role is to help resolve political problems. The AZANLA military commanders were always subject to the AZAPO political leaders, and never the other way round. As a matter of fact, an AZANLA Combatant was both a political activist and a military soldier rolled into one.

With that said, we must not forget that the Western Afrikan countries have tasted too little of popular or democratic governance. They have been faced with one coup after the other. Take Mali, for instance. It gained its independence from France in 1960. Political efforts were afoot to free Mali from colonialism to the extent that the country withdrew from an organisation of former French colonies called the French Community in West Africa. You could say that was an equivalent of the so-called Commonwealth of Nations, which is an organisation of former British colonies, of which South Africa remains a "proud" member.

The efforts of this Islamised and One-Party State Mali did not go a distance as they were short-circuited by a 1968 coup, whose military rule lasted until a 1991 people's uprising that restored popular or democratic governance in 1992. Meanwhile, Mali continued to face destabilisation by ethnic groups and infiltration by groups like ISIL. The Tuareg people in the North of Mali even declared in 2012 that they had established an independent state from Mali. Another flood of coups followed with one in 2012, 2020 and 2021.

Military coups are seldom the best solution for the stability and development of a country. The people must be organised, conscientised and mobilised into a coordinated revolutionary action by a vanguard movement. This usually takes time and huge risks for the political activists. Nevertheless, this historic task has to be carried out. We have seen how the faceless and apparently leaderless movements like the so-called Arab Spring can be hijacked by the very same forces the uprising sought to overthrow. Short cuts lead to half-cooked victories, which sometimes condemn the masses to bloated stomachs that can prove deadly.

Like we said, not every change is change. Change from above neutralises and kills the popular agency. Indeed, nothing for the people without the people. Change can move in both opposite directions. There is progressive or positive change, which marks a leap forward in the struggles of the masses. There is yet another change that can reverse that progressive change and thrust the revolution hundreds of years backwards. That is regressive or negative change, which is sometimes characterised as counter-revolutionary or reactionary. That type of change is no change at all. It must be rejected. The people must always seek to be in charge through the Mass Line. They should never stand idle and surrender their power to the military dictators.

There is therefore not much to write home about with regards to the coups and the installation of military rule in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger. No effort must be spared to ensure that popular governance is restored in those countries.