

Gabon: Monolithic Authoritarianism and the Resurgence of Military Rule

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Abstract: This article examines the transition from civilian authoritarian rule to military governance in Gabon, focusing on the factors that precipitated the 2023 military coup in a country characterized by a long-standing deficit of democratic governance. The study addresses the following question: How did entrenched authoritarianism contribute to the emergence and popular acceptance of military rule in Gabon? Drawing on theories of political transition and governance, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach based on secondary data and employs thematic analysis to explore the interplay among political disenchantment, corruption, and socio-economic challenges in shaping public perceptions of political authority. The findings reveal that widespread dissatisfaction with civilian rule — characterized by corruption, ineffective governance, and weak democratic accountability — created favorable conditions for military intervention. The study further demonstrates that authoritarian leadership fostered public frustration, socio-economic inequalities, political repression, and patronage networks, thereby generating an environment conducive to the coup, which was largely welcomed by segments of the Gabonese population. At the same time, the findings highlight the ambivalence of public attitudes toward military governance, raising questions about the prospects for a sustainable return to civilian democratic rule. The article contributes to governance and po-

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litical transition scholarship by illuminating the complex dynamics between civilian and military regimes in an African context. It also offers policy recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, promoting equitable resource distribution, and enhancing democratic resilience to address citizens' grievances and reduce the appeal of military rule.

Keywords: Monolithic authoritarianism, civil-military relations, Gabon, military coups, democratisation, governance.

Introduction

The resurgence of military regimes in Africa has attracted scholarly interest in the context of ongoing debates on the nature of authoritarian rule on the continent. Africa has persistently experienced military involvement in political affairs through military rule. Some scholars consider it a political anomaly, as it continues to undermine democratic practice in Africa (Badie et al., 2011). Some post-independence African countries witnessed the replacement of Western models of democratic institutions with authoritarian regimes, some of which resulted from military coups (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). Africa has recorded 106 successful military coups out of 206 attempts since 1950. In recent years, several coups have occurred across the continent, leading to the establishment of military governments, with a notable surge in 2020. Recent cases of coups and military regimes have been recorded in West and Central Africa, particularly in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Gabon. Monolithic authoritarianism, characterized by the concentration of political power in a single leader or political party, has historically marked many African states. This perspective is crucial for understanding the political landscape in Gabon, where over half a century of governance by the Bongo Ondimba family has entrenched a culture of patronage and repression.

In recent years, several Central and West African countries have witnessed a troubling resurgence of military coups, a trend that has reignited debates about the sustainability of democratic rule on the continent. This development is particularly significant, as military interventions often disrupt fragile political systems, exacerbate socio-economic inequalities, and lead to serious human rights violations. The case of Gabon, particularly in the aftermath of the August 2023 military coup, reflects a striking example of how deep-rooted autocratic practices can culminate in abrupt regime change. This development underscores the urgency of understanding the key factors that enable monolithic authoritarianism to persist despite widespread public discontent (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023).

Current research on authoritarianism in Africa has largely focused on authoritarian rule and accountability (Fombad, 2020), revolution and authoritarianism (Volpi, 2017), aid and authoritarianism (Hagmann & Reyntjens, 2016), political succession (Battera, 2023), competitive authoritarianism (Bogaards & Elischer, 2016), hybrid regimes, democratic

backsliding, and the role of civil society movements (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Nevertheless, the specific dynamics of monolithic authoritarianism and its relationship with military coups remain underexplored, especially in the case of Gabon. This research gap calls for an in-depth investigation into how authoritarian regimes maintain power, what triggers military intervention within such systems, and the socio-political drivers of renewed military coups.

A dominant assumption in post-Cold War African politics is that democratization represents an inevitable trajectory. This assumption fails to account for the resilience of authoritarian regimes that adapt and persist despite societal demands for reform (Carothers, 2002). Moreover, existing studies often fail to adequately examine the connection between authoritarian governance and military coups, particularly in countries such as Gabon, where a single family has monopolized political power for decades. This paper addresses this gap by asking: How did monolithic authoritarianism in Gabon trigger the emergence of a military coup? What prospects does the military regime hold for correcting the shortcomings of civilian authoritarian rule in advancing democratic governance, and what implications does this have for the broader African context? To address these questions, it is essential to examine the interplay of political discontent, socio-economic challenges, and historical legacies that shape public perceptions of authority in Gabon. In doing so, this study challenges the assumption that democratic governance is the only viable path for African countries and instead emphasizes the complexities that allow authoritarian regimes to consolidate power.

This study explores the factors through which monolithic authoritarianism in Gabon facilitated military intervention. A key feature of this paper is its emphasis on Gabon's political history and the socio-economic conditions under autocratic rule that contributed to the military coup. Empirical evidence from African cases demonstrates how entrenched authoritarian governance can culminate in military interventions, thereby undermining existing political structures, with a particular focus on Gabon. The findings suggest that the Bongo administration's reliance on patronage, combined with widespread economic grievances and limited political representation, created an unstable environment conducive to military intervention.

The paper is structured into several sections. Following this introduction, the literature review situates the study within the existing scholarly discourse on authoritarianism and military coups in Africa, followed by the theoretical framework. The methodology section outlines the approach used to investigate and analyze Gabon's political transition, followed by a brief contextual analysis of Gabon's political landscape. A presentation of the findings follows, along with a discussion of their implications. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the results and provides recommendations for future research and policy considerations.

Literature review

The recent resurrection of military coups in Africa has attracted urgent concerns, particularly in authoritarian governance milieus that exemplify many African states. This literature review section revisits the scholarly debate on authoritarian rule and military coups in Africa. The analysis unfolds thematically, focusing on the historical background of authoritarianism, civil-military relations, socio-economic factors, external influences, and the resurgence of recent military coups.

Historical Context of Authoritarianism

The historical foundations of authoritarian regimes in Africa are rooted in colonial rule, which established centralized governance institutions that often disregarded local political systems. Nugent (2012) suggests that colonial systems disrupted traditional institutions, resulting in a legacy of authoritarian leadership that persisted after independence. This distortion created a divide between the state and the population, fostering environments in which authoritarianism could flourish (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019). Amanda Robinson (2019) contends that colonial authorities prioritized resource extraction over the development of strong political institutions, resulting in weak state structures ill-equipped to sustain democratic governance after independence. Colonial rule thus established a governance context characterized by paternalism and a lack of democratic structures, which postcolonial states inherited. In his analysis of Tanzania, Zambia, and Côte d'Ivoire, Hartmann (2022) demonstrates how authoritarian systems rooted in colonialism continue to influence contemporary political behavior. This historical context has nurtured a political ethos in which authoritarian rule thrives, as leaders often resort to coercive measures to maintain control in the absence of legitimate institutional frameworks (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019). Furthermore, the colonial legacy of "Big Man" politics, in which leaders exercise significant power without accountability, has persisted in many African states, weakening democratic practices and fostering conditions conducive to electoral fraud and corruption (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019).

The persistence of authoritarian regimes is evident in the political trajectories of various African states. Sylla (2024) argues that, amid growing pressure for decolonization, France opted for conditional independence by signing cooperation agreements that enabled it to maintain influence over its former colonies in areas such as monetary policy, military bases, diplomacy, raw materials, and external trade. The author further notes that these agreements were concluded with political elites whom France had supported to assume leadership positions in their countries, often through electoral manipulation or the suppression of dissenting political voices. Scholars such as Woldense and Kroeger (2024) and Hartmann (2022) provide a nuanced understanding of how the legacies of authoritarian systems continue to shape Africa's political landscape, particularly through the circumvention of presidential term limits. According to these authors, evasion of term limits has significant

implications, including increased political instability and public dissatisfaction, which may result in social unrest and weakened political legitimacy. Ngcayisa (2021) describes a transition from traditional authoritarian systems in Africa, characterized by personalist autocrats, to what he terms developmental authoritarianism, which prioritizes economic growth while maintaining strict political control. Citing cases such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda, the author argues that these systems emphasize economic development at the expense of civil liberties and political accountability.

Socioeconomic challenges faced by African states further complicate the relationship between colonial legacies and contemporary authoritarian governance. Colonial economic structures were designed to serve colonial interests, leaving newly independent states with limited resources and insufficient infrastructure for sustainable development (Ngcayisa, 2021). Consequently, many African leaders have adopted authoritarian practices to manage dissent and maintain stability, often invoking national unity as justification for suppressing opposition (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019). The persistence of authoritarian regimes reflects a broader struggle for political control and economic sovereignty, as evidenced by recent military coups that challenge narratives of democratic consolidation and highlight ongoing concerns about neo-colonialism and economic stagnation (Sally, 2024). Addressing the legacies of colonialism is essential for promoting democratic governance and political accountability in Africa. However, whether military coups represent a viable solution remains an ongoing debate.

Civil-Military Relations in Africa

Civil-military relations in Africa have attracted significant scholarly and political attention, highlighting a complex interaction between military power and civilian rule. The colonial legacy has meaningfully shaped these dynamics, often resulting in strong and politically engaged militaries. Funnell and Walker (2020) note that the military has historically played a key role in governance, influencing policymaking processes. According to Gutteridge (1975), many African states inherited weak governance institutions from colonial rule, which allowed military interference to become a common instrument of political change. The military often positions itself as a guarantor of national stability, thereby weakening civilian authority and democratic practices (Adeyeye & Adeyeye, 2024). This tendency is evident in countries such as Egypt and Sudan, where the military has repeatedly intervened during political crises, highlighting its role as a stabilizing force while constraining democratic development (Bassil, 2015; White, 2017).

Recent studies emphasize the evolving nature of civil-military relations within processes of democratic transition and socio-economic challenges. Scholars such as Houngnikpo (2016) argue that military involvement in politics is not solely a reflection of coercive authority but also a response to public demands for security and stability in the face of terrorism and civil unrest. This perspective suggests that civil-military relations can be both

collaborative and confrontational, depending on the context (Musa, 2024). Moreover, the growing influence of civil society in promoting military accountability and transparency has contributed to the restructuring of these relationships (Croissant & Kühn, 2017). These developments indicate a gradual shift toward more democratic civil-military relations, despite a continuing environment marked by challenges associated with authoritarianism and governance.

Economic Disparities and Governance Legitimacy

Economic inequalities in African states have significant implications for governance legitimacy, particularly within a monolithic authoritarianism framework. Political legitimacy refers to the extent to which the population supports a political regime based on its responsiveness to their basic needs (Bogaards & Elischer, 2016), thereby shaping the quality of governance (Arif & Dutta, 2024). Arif and Dutta (2024) further contend that increased legitimacy strengthens a government's capacity to design and implement policies that enhance governance outcomes. Robert and Eche (2020) argue that many political regimes in sub-Saharan Africa lack legitimacy due to ineffective governance and stagnant economic growth caused by undemocratic practices. Mismanagement of resources and the prevalence of corruption contribute to the erosion of citizens' trust in governance (Ngcayisa, 2021). Many African nations exhibit substantial income inequality and poverty, which further undermines the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes (Robert & Eche, 2020).

The concentration of economic power among a small segment of elites aligned with ruling authorities leaves the majority of citizens disenfranchised and marginalized. Countries rich in natural resources often allocate wealth to sustain patronage networks among political elites, reinforcing inequality and providing fertile ground for authoritarian systems (Omeje, 2017). This exclusion can generate widespread discontent and lead to questioning of regime legitimacy, as the population may perceive the government as incapable of addressing their fundamental needs and aspirations (Woldense & Kroeger, 2024). Woldense and Kroeger (2024) argue that the stability of authoritarian regimes is closely linked to the formation and management of elite coalitions. The inability of governments to address socioeconomic challenges creates favorable conditions for military intervention, as segments of the population may view the military as a credible alternative to ineffective civilian governance. Arif and Dutta (2021) contend that the perception of a social contract that benefits all citizens enhances the legitimacy of government policies. Conversely, the absence of equitable economic growth fosters grievances that may manifest as political instability and, in some cases, military coups, as alternative power structures emerge to challenge the status quo.

Moreover, the relationship between economic performance and governance legitimacy is further complicated by the concept of the rentier state, which is central to understanding the political economy of many African countries (Omeje, 2017). The author contributes

to the resource curse debate, arguing that colonial legacies have significantly shaped contemporary rentier politics in states characterized by authoritarianism, weak governance structures, and conflict (Omeje, 2017). Governments in many African states rely heavily on external revenues from oil and mineral exports rather than domestic taxation, thereby limiting the development of a robust private sector (Yates, 2020). This reliance can create a divide between the state and its citizens, as governments often prioritize the interests of foreign stakeholders and domestic elites over those of the broader population (Omeje, 2017). Consequently, the absence of a social contract based on shared accountability erodes trust in government institutions, fostering perceptions that the state is unresponsive to citizens' needs (Arif & Dutta, 2024). As economic disparities widen and governance legitimacy declines, the likelihood of military intervention increases, as the military may exploit governance vacuums and social instability to position itself as a stabilizing force amid escalating unrest (Akinola & Makombe, 2024).

The Resurgence of Military Coups in Africa

Africa has been a hotspot for military coups worldwide over the past sixty years (Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023). Of the 492 abortive and successful coups between 1950 and 2023 globally, 221 occurred in Africa, with 109 being successful (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). Duzor and Williamson (2023) reveal that at least 45 of the 54 African states have experienced at least one coup attempt since 1950. The continent witnessed nine successful coups between 2020 and 2023, along with a similar number of failed attempts, particularly in Francophone countries such as Mali, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon (Vines, 2024). Sudan has recorded 17 coups since 1950, the highest in Africa, while Burundi (11), Ghana, and Sierra Leone (10 each) have experienced the highest number of unsuccessful coup attempts (Fleck, 2023).

Bihina and Ayata (2024) identify three phases of African military coups. The first phase, from 1960 to 1970, was triggered by post-independence African leaders who adopted single-party systems, authoritarian rule, and political positions that diverged sharply from those of their former colonizers. The second phase, between 1980 and 1990, occurred during a global economic crisis, during which African leaders were accused of corruption and of failing to address economic hardship. The military often intervened as a self-proclaimed liberator of the population, justifying its actions as necessary to restore order and political stability. While the period from 2000 to 2019 witnessed relative stability in Africa, the years 2020 to 2023 recorded a surge in military coups in Francophone Africa, particularly in West Africa, with most affected countries classified as Least Developed Countries, except for Gabon (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). These coups “occurred within vacuums, young regimes and long-entrenched ones, countries moving both toward and away from democracy, those with ongoing insurgencies, and those in relative peace” (Adeyeye & Adeyeye, 2024, p. 168). This resurgence underscores the need to examine the literature on their causes.

According to recent scholarship, military coups in Africa are driven by the legacy of colonialism, weak state institutions, ethnic and political tensions, socio-economic factors, poor governance, external influence, and political instability (Bihina & Ayata, 2024; Sylla, 2024). Colonialism introduced foreign governance systems and arbitrary boundaries that served colonial interests, resulting in weak political institutions and entrenched ethnic divisions after independence. Sylla (2024) contends that colonialism did not aim to create favorable conditions for democratic governance, but rather reinforced ethnic and group identities in ways that sustained colonial hegemony. With inherited weak political structures, many African countries have struggled to maintain governance and stability, making them vulnerable to military takeovers after independence.

Furthermore, ethnic and political tensions have also contributed to military coups in Africa. According to Harkness (2016), ethnic conflicts under military regimes have significantly contributed to coup dynamics, as observed in Ghana (1956–1966), Nigeria (1960–1967), and Sierra Leone (1968). This is compounded by the politicization of ethnic identities and their mobilization for political purposes, which has fueled hostility in many African societies (Harkness, 2018; Ndiyun, 2022). Additionally, Akinola and Makombe (2024) note that the March 2021 attempted coup in Niger resulted from political tensions following the February 2021 presidential elections, in which the incumbent Mohamed Bazoum's predecessor, Mahamane Ousmane, refused to accept defeat.

Moreover, economic factors and political instability also contribute to the resurgence of military coups in Africa. Conditions such as high poverty rates, systemic corruption, and ineffective economic policies fuel public discontent. Duzor and Williamson (2023) argue that military coups are more frequent in economically vulnerable countries, citing cases such as Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Chad, and Mali. Similarly, political factors such as civil unrest, electoral fraud, and insecurity create unstable environments conducive to coups. While electoral malpractice is widespread in Africa, Duzor and Williamson (2023) suggest that Sahel countries continue to exhibit many of the conditions that trigger coups. The authors note that coup plotters in Niger and Burkina Faso justified their actions by citing the failure of governments to address the escalating Islamist insurgency in the Sahel.

Theoretical Framework

The renaissance of military coups in Africa, particularly the first experience in Gabon, can be examined through three theoretical lenses that illuminate the dynamics of authoritarian rule and its link with military coups. This section analyses three principal frameworks: the theory of competitive authoritarianism, the concept of elite coalitions, and historical institutionalism.

Competitive authoritarianism, a notion introduced by Levitsky and Way (2010) to explain how governments present a façade of democratic rule while practising authoritarianism, refers to regimes that, while ostensibly democratic, engage in significant state subversion

and manipulation of political processes. Such regimes exhibit formal characteristics of democracy — constitutionalism, human rights and freedoms, rule of law, and electoral structures — but fail to adhere to its minimum standards (Cameron, 2018). This theory has been used to examine how Robert Mugabe consolidated power amid opposition in Zimbabwe, and how Yoweri Museveni weakened opposition to maintain power in Uganda (Bogaards & Elischer, 2016). The recent military coup in Gabon can be viewed through this lens, as the civilian government displayed democratic features but was authoritarian in practice, thereby weakening democratic foundations and processes in the country. The military's intervention can be seen as a response to the apparent inability of the civilian regime to fulfil democratic promises and respond to public grievances, thus creating a void that the military sought to fill (Diamond, 2002).

Another relevant framework for understanding the consolidation of authoritarian rule in Gabon is the concept of elite coalitions. This concept suggests that the strength of authoritarian governments often depends on leaders' ability to maintain support from key elites (Brownlee, 2007). According to the author, elites are “national-level agenda setters” and “insiders with privileged access to rulers and the state” (Brownlee, 2007, p. 12). In his study of authoritarian rule in Malaysia, Dan Slater (2003) also argues that, to consolidate authority in institutionalised authoritarian contexts, rulers employ strategies of packing, rigging, and evasion. Austin Matthews and Lúcia Sá (2024) applied the elite coalition lens to examine the resilience of authoritarianism in Equatorial Guinea between 1979 and 2023, highlighting President Obiang's preference for forming coalitions with regional elites. The historical pattern of political coalitions established during Omar Bongo's long tenure demonstrates how elite arrangements can sustain authoritarian governance. The military coup in Gabon can thus be interpreted as a shift in the elite coalition, where dissatisfaction with civilian rule prompted military actors to reassert their influence. This framework also suggests that elite realignment, triggered by geopolitical shifts after the Cold War, is essential for understanding how African authoritarian systems adapted and maintained power in complex political contexts (Woldense & Kroeger, 2024).

Finally, historical institutionalism offers a framework for examining the long-standing impact of historical legacies on contemporary political behaviour. This perspective highlights that past political arrangements and institutional structures significantly shape governance outcomes and public attitudes (Thelen, 1999). In Gabon, the legacy of authoritarian governance has created a complex political environment in which historical grievances and experiences influence public perceptions of authority. The 2023 military coup can be interpreted as a culmination of past governance patterns, where segments of the population, disillusioned by ineffective civilian leadership, viewed military rule as a viable alternative (Cheeseman, 2015).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the dynamics of authoritarian governance and military coups in Gabon. The qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate for this research as it permits a detailed understanding of complex social phenomena, such as political power dynamics and military intervention, which are often difficult to measure.

The study's data were obtained from secondary sources, including academic publications, government documents, news reports, and civil society publications. This approach is suitable as it offers an in-depth synthesis of the existing literature and contextualizes the prevailing political environment in Gabon. Using multiple secondary data sources facilitates the triangulation of information, enhancing the trustworthiness and reliability of the results (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Key databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL) were used to collect relevant literature. Furthermore, reports and publications from civil society and international organizations were used to assess the broader implications of authoritarian governance and military intervention in Gabon. These varied sources ensured a holistic perspective on authoritarianism and the military coup.

The collected data were analyzed thematically in accordance with the principles outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017). Thematic analysis offers flexibility and allows researchers to identify, code, analyze, and report relevant patterns (themes) in qualitative data, guided by the research questions. This method was selected for its potential to provide a rich, comprehensive, and detailed account of the data, which is crucial for understanding the dynamics of Gabon's political situation. The analysis procedure comprised several stages. First, the data were sorted through repeated reading and note-taking. Second, preliminary codes were generated, focusing on key features of the data relevant to the research questions. Third, the generated codes were organized into potential themes, which were then reviewed and refined to ensure accuracy and proper representation of the data. Lastly, the themes were defined and named, resulting in a coherent account that responds to the research objectives.

Background

Gabon's political path has been characterised by an intricate evolution from colonial rule to civilian authoritarianism, featuring the interplay of various socio-political elements and historical occurrences. This section investigates the major indicators that have shaped Gabon's governance scene, emphasising the consequences of colonial legacies, the development of a national identity, and the institution of authoritarian rule.

Colonial Rule and Its Legacy

Gabon's political edifice can be situated within its colonial history. The arrival of European explorers in the 15th century introduced an era of exploitation and transformation for local populations. Gabon was colonized by France in the late 19th century, with colonial rule disrupting existing traditional leadership structures and social systems (Yates, 2020). The French pursued the assimilation of indigenous populations into their culture, which resulted in the emergence of a new elite class trained in French institutions. This assimilated elite would subsequently play a central role in the political arena of post-independence Gabon (Yates, 2020).

A sense of "Gabonese" identity developed among the various communities, although a subdued one due to French assimilation policies (Yates, 2020). Although the struggle against colonial rule led to independence in 1960, it was nevertheless followed by the continuation of neocolonial relationships, with Gabon and France concluding cooperation treaties that preserved French influence over political and economic policies (Gaulme, 2023). This legacy of dependency, characterized by repression and political singularism, has had a lasting impact on Gabon's governance, contributing to prolonged authoritarian rule.

Emergence of Authoritarian Regimes

In the wake of independence, Gabon was led by Léon Mba, whose leadership was marked by dictatorial policies that established a precedent for subsequent leaders. Mba experienced a military coup on 17 February 1964 led by young officers of the Gabonese defense forces, who accused the president of establishing a police regime, just a week before legislative elections organized under disputed conditions (Gaulme, 2023). After Mba's death, Omar Bongo came to power in 1967, instituted a one-party system in 1968, and governed for forty-two years, establishing a system of succession-based governance that depended on patronage and control over the country's resources (BertelsmannStiftung, 2026). Bongo's leadership was characterized by authoritarian rule, political subjugation, and self-serving economic management, primarily through the misuse of the country's oil resources to maintain power (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The oil boom of the 1970s generated substantial revenues, which Bongo used to secure elite loyalty and suppress the opposition.

Bongo's rule was notable for its ability to adapt to changing political environments, particularly during the end of the Cold War and the global push for democratic governance. Despite introducing a multi-party system through the constitutional reforms of 1991, Bongo's PDG maintained its hold on political power through manipulation and electoral malpractice (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The political regime remained predominantly authoritarian, with Bongo relying on his control over state institutions to suppress dissenting voices (BertelsmannStiftung, 2026).

The Transition to Ali Bongo

Following Omar Bongo's death in 2009, his son Ali Bongo Ondimba rose to the country's highest office, continuing hereditary leadership. Ali Bongo's government faced significant setbacks, including public skepticism regarding corruption and incompetence, as well as calls for political reform. His leadership followed the same authoritarian pattern established by his father, focusing on the consolidation of power through patronage networks and control over the military (BertelsmannStiftung, 2026). Gabon's political arena remained fragile, as demonstrated by the political turmoil following Ali Bongo's stroke in 2018, which raised questions about his leadership legitimacy and the future of the Bongo dynasty. The accumulated grievances of the population and disputes over the results of the 2023 presidential elections led the military to overthrow Ali Bongo in a coup described by some sources as peaceful (Bihina & Ayata, 2024).

The historical background of Gabon's governance highlights a trajectory shaped by colonial legacies, the rise of authoritarian rule, and the challenges of transitioning to democratic governance. The interaction of these factors created a political context in which military intervention was perceived as a possible response to public disillusionment and political instability. This historical background provides the foundation for understanding current political trends of authoritarian rule in Gabon and the factors contributing to the 2023 coup.

Findings

This section presents the key factors of the military coup in Gabon and examines the public perception of military governance as opposed to civilian authoritarianism in the country.

Gabonese Political Governance Structures Prior To the Coup

Before the 30 August 2023 coup, the 1991 Constitution of Gabon structured the main state institutions around the authoritarian and dynastic leadership of the Bongo family, which had been established at independence. The President of the Republic headed a highly centralised executive branch, alongside the ruling PDG party, which had been in power since 1968. Omar Bongo, upon gaining power in 1967, established one-party authoritarian rule under the PDG, which lasted until the 1991 constitutional revision introduced a multi-party system; however, the country continued to experience a de facto single-party regime through patronage and repression (BertelsmannStiftung, 2026). Gabon has a bicameral legislature composed of the National Assembly and the Senate, both dominated by the ruling PDG. The country's decentralisation system operates through regional and municipal councils, which are also dominated by the PDG, thereby reinforcing the party's control over both central and local governance (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The independence of the judiciary in the country is undermined by pressure and influence from the executive.

During his rule, Ali Bongo was accused of buying off opponents to secure elite coalitions, engaging in pervasive corruption, misappropriating the country's resources, and appointing family members to key positions (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023). His disregard for democratic principles and the rule of law fueled the rise of opposition movements seeking change, intensified popular discontent, and created momentum for political upheaval. With a GDP per capita of US\$17,440, 43.5% of the population lived below the poverty line by 2019, alongside an unemployment rate of 40% in 2020 (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023). The authors further argue that Gabon's political situation prior to the coup was similar to that of many Central African states characterized by poor economic governance and decades of uninterrupted autocratic rule, conditions that are conducive to social unrest and unconstitutional changes of government.

Factors Accounting for the 2023 Military Coup in Gabon

The August 2023 bloodless military coup in Gabon can be attributed to multiple interconnected factors that collectively created an unstable political environment. The immediate trigger of the coup was electoral fraud and manipulation (Sylla, 2024). The coup was primarily occasioned by tensions associated with the presidential elections, in which Ali Bongo was declared the winner amid serious allegations of electoral fraud, the absence of international observers and journalists, and the suspension of internet access (Henry & Murray, 2024). Many Gabonese viewed the elections as manipulated, resulting in public outrage and protests against the legitimacy of Ali Bongo's government (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The military justified its intervention, stating that the presidential elections, in which Ali Bongo was declared the winner with 64% of the vote, did not meet the expectations of the Gabonese people, who demanded transparent, credible, and inclusive elections.

Moreover, corruption and bad governance played a crucial role in the military takeover. The Bongo regime has been criticised for widespread corruption, nepotism, and ineffective management of the country's resources, which eroded its legitimacy and fuelled public disillusionment (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023). Many Gabonese perceived the government as incapable of addressing growing socioeconomic challenges, including inequality, unemployment, and poverty, which have persisted despite the country's rich natural resources (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). This dissatisfaction contributed to popular support for the military intervention, as the military positioned itself as a defender of national interest against a corrupt regime.

Furthermore, Gabon's historical governance background was also instrumental in the coup. For over half a century, the Bongo family maintained political dominance in Gabon, fostering a political landscape characterised by centralised governance, nepotism, favouritism, and authoritarianism (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). This dynastic rule was often criticised for failing to respond to the needs and aspirations of the Gabonese people,

resulting in widespread feelings of disenchantment and frustration among citizens (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The governance model, marked by restricted political freedoms and repression of the opposition, further alienated the population, paving the way for military intervention as a means of restoring public order.

Additionally, the military's role was crucial in the coup. The military's perception of itself as a stabilising force was central to justifying the intervention, which was framed as a necessary action to restore political stability and good governance amid contested presidential election results in Gabon (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). This perception aligns with many Gabonese citizens who welcomed the military intervention, hoping it could lead to a change in a political status quo characterised by monolithic authoritarianism for over five decades. The success of military coups in other African countries also influenced the Gabonese military, as recent experiences suggested that successful coups were not only possible but, in some contexts, tolerated (Yates, 2023). Some Gabonese remain sceptical about the actual motives behind the military intervention, given that each of Ali Bongo's presidential election victories (2009, 2016, and 2023) was contested by the opposition, often accompanied by military deployment to suppress post-electoral protests (Quenum & Amadou, 2023).

Public Perception of Military Governance

Public sentiment significantly contributed to the success of the military coup. Many Gabonese citizens supported the military's overthrow of the authoritarian regime, viewing the coup as a liberation from over half a century of autocratic rule (Quenum & Amadou, 2023). This popular support granted the military a degree of legitimacy to execute the coup, highlighting a broader desire for political change among citizens. The Gabonese people considered the coup a rupture with a political regime that manipulated electoral processes and constitutional term limits to extend its stay in power (Melly, 2023). While most Gabonese support democracy, some argue that elections do not always enable voters to remove leaders who fail to meet their expectations (Henry & Murray, 2024).

To demonstrate their support for the coup, crowds flooded the streets of Libreville, celebrating the military intervention (Yates, 2023), although experts suggest that the ruling elite remain deeply entrenched in the country's political system (Gbadamosi, 2023). The same military had been involved in repressing opposition groups and post-electoral uprisings under Ali Bongo, particularly in 2009 and 2016 (Civicus, 2023). The military's dual role as both a force for restoring order and a disruptor of political governance in Gabon demonstrates the complexity of civil–military relations in Africa.

To gain widespread support from the population, Oligui Nguema chose to describe the event as a “coup de libération” rather than a “coup d'état,” presenting himself as the liberator of Gabon from a monolithic dictatorship (Quenum & Amadou, 2023). Immediately after the coup, Gabonese citizens in Libreville and other towns took to the streets shouting

“c’est la libération” and “Bongo dehors” (“this is liberation” and “Bongo out”) (Quenum & Amadou, 2023). While the transitional government initially included opposition members, it has since sidelined much of the opposition, giving Oligui Nguema a relatively unobstructed path to implementing his planned institutional reforms in Gabon (Loppy, 2024). The coup leaders also leveraged citizens’ frustration to mobilize popular support and gain legitimacy, despite fears that the military junta may continue to appropriate the country’s resources, as previous regimes did, at the expense of the population (Henry & Murray, 2024).

International Reactions to the Coup

Immediately after the military junta declared the coup, many countries and international institutions condemned the act. The United Nations Secretary-General condemned the military takeover “as a means of resolving the post-electoral crisis” (Al Jazeera, 2023). The African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson, Moussa Faki, described the coup as an infringement of AU rules on elections, democracy, and governance, calling on the junta to ensure a return to constitutional order. The AU Peace and Security Council suspended Gabon from the organization with immediate effect (Tribune de Genève, 2023).

China, Russia, Germany, France, the United States, and the European Union also condemned the coup, calling for a prompt stabilization of the situation, while Nigeria’s Bola Tinubu expressed deep concern about an authoritarian contagion spreading across the continent (Henry & Murray, 2023). The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), of which Gabon is a member, suspended Gabon from the organization until the reestablishment of constitutional order in the country. This suspension lasted only six months, as the same institution decided on 9 March 2024 to lift the suspension, noting significant progress in the return to constitutional order, public acceptance of the coup, and a proposed 24-month transition timeline (Le Figaro, 2024).

Governance Innovations Introduced by the Military Junta

Following the military coup in Gabon, a transitional council was announced, with Oligui installed as transitional president on 4 September 2023, alongside the suspension of the constitution and the dissolution of all state institutions. Oligui appointed loyalists to two-thirds of the parliament and all nine members of the Constitutional Court. Due to pressure from the international community, the transitional government organised a closely managed national dialogue in mid-2024, in which the military played a leading role. A key outcome of the dialogue was the revision of the country’s constitution to permit military members to contest elective positions, abolish the post of Prime Minister, extend the presidential mandate to seven years renewable once, and remove the two-round electoral system (Siegle & Wahila, 2025). The dialogue also recommended the indefinite suspension

of approximately 200 political parties, restricting members of the ousted President's PDG from participating in elections for three years, and enacting a law to curb the proliferation of political parties for self-serving purposes (Moki, 2024).

Discussion

This research focused on the persistence of monolithic authoritarian rule and the 2023 military coup in Gabon. The study aimed to answer the questions: How did monolithic authoritarianism in Gabon trigger the upsurge of a military coup? What prospects does the military regime hold for addressing the shortcomings of civilian authoritarian regimes in democratic governance? And what implications does this have for the broader African context? Through a qualitative research design, the study employed thematic analysis to present the major findings. The results highlighted multiple factors accounting for the persistence of dynastic authoritarian rule in Gabon, including the impact of colonial history and external influence, particularly from France. The findings also emphasized how authoritarian leadership promoted widespread public dissatisfaction, socioeconomic inequalities, repression, and patronage, creating a suitable context for a military coup, which was widely welcomed by the Gabonese people. A key finding demonstrates inconsistency in public perception of the military coup and governance, which obscures prospects for a civilian government. Amid skepticism, some Gabonese consider the military a stabilizing institution, which presents challenges for those advocating democratic governance alternatives (Civicus, 2023).

These findings resonate with previous research on authoritarian regimes and their role in military coups. For instance, the results on the link between colonial legacies and monolithic authoritarian rule in Gabon align with Woldense and Kroegeer (2024) and Hartmann (2022), who suggest that colonial rule established legacies of authoritarian governance that continue to impact the contemporary political landscape in Africa, such as the circumvention of presidential term limits. The 1991 Gabonese constitution introduced a seven-year presidential term renewable once, but this restriction was lifted by Omar Bongo in 2003, a trend that has been adopted by the military junta in the 2024 constitution (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The findings also highlight sociopolitical tensions resulting from contested presidential election results as the main trigger of the military coup in Gabon. This echoes Akinola and Makombe's (2024) argument that electoral tensions triggered the March 2021 coup in Niger.

Furthermore, the study's results on inequalities and socioeconomic hardship among the Gabonese population — reflected in a 43.5% poverty rate and a 40% unemployment rate — align with Duzor and Williamson's (2023) contention that most African military coups occur in poor countries. Akinola and Makombe (2024) also support this argument, positing that economic stagnation significantly contributes to public dissatisfaction and attracts military intervention. Economic hardship in Gabon is further exacerbated by the

rentier state phenomenon, resulting in overdependence on oil revenues and neglect of the private sector. This aligns with Robinson, who traces resource extraction practices to the colonial era, and Cheeseman and Fisher (2019), who suggest that reliance on external rents such as oil and mineral resources can distort political incentives, reduce accountability, and weaken responsiveness to citizens' demands.

Moreover, Gabon's case study can be viewed from an elite coalition perspective. This perspective holds that authoritarian leaders employ various tactics to obtain and sustain support from key elites through packing, rigging, and evading strategies (Brownlee, 2007), including preferential treatment and coalition-building with elites from the ruler's region (Austin Matthews & Lúcia Sá, 2024). The study results indicate that the Bongo dynasty established an elite coalition in Gabon to perpetuate authoritarian rule. Elite coalitions under the Bongo dynasty were maintained through patronage, co-optation of opposition figures, and appointment of family members to strategic positions in the country (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023). This coalition enabled the Bongo family to sustain power and control resources in Gabon for over half a century, thereby marginalizing citizens' welfare. The findings emphasize that the Gabonese military has been part of the alliance that served the interests of the Bongo regime, repressing dissent and cracking down on sociopolitical protests.

Historical institutionalism offers a lens through which to understand the impact of historical legacies on the persistence of authoritarian governance in Gabon. The findings demonstrate how historical heritage, particularly colonial governance patterns and institutions, has influenced contemporary political realities and institutions in Gabon. This perspective underscores the relevance of historical context in understanding the resilience of authoritarian governments and the challenges of democratic transition (Thelen, 1999).

One unexpected finding of this study was the level of popular support and acclamation for the military coup and governance in Gabon. This support likely originates from entrenched frustration with 56 years of kleptocratic rule, leading some Gabonese to view the military as a necessary alternative to ineffective and repressive monolithic civilian governance. This tendency, also observed in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, suggests a possible shift in public perception that could have significant implications for future regimes in Gabon. The significance of this finding lies in its potential to reshape the political landscape, as the military regime may leverage popular support to extend its rule in Gabon.

An alternative interpretation of the findings views Oligui as a continuation of the Bongo dynasty rather than a popular liberator from Bongo-era repression. Oligui is the ousted president's cousin and former aide-de-camp to his father until 2009, as well as head of the Presidential Guard from 2020 under Ali Bongo. While his extraconstitutional seizure of power highlights the risks of a politicized and loyal military deeply involved in sustaining an autocratic regime for decades, it also suggests that the barriers to military overthrow of civilian rule are increasingly weakening.

Oligui's actions to retain power under civilian rule resemble those of General Mahamat Déby, who bypassed the constitutional succession procedure after the death of his father, Idriss Déby Itno, to assume power in April 2021. He assumed leadership of the military transition, organized a staged national dialogue, and conducted a flawed constitutional referendum that allowed him to participate in and win the May 2024 presidential elections. The constitutional reforms introduced by Oligui and adopted in a controlled referendum in November 2024 further concentrate power within Gabon's already highly centralized executive branch. With constitutional permission to run in the anticipated August 2025 presidential elections, Oligui hopes to benefit from the lowered threshold for electoral victory through the abolition of the two-round electoral system, thereby transitioning from military to civilian rule. While this aligns with Powell and Hammou (2024), who contend that in most successful coups in Africa between 2021 and 2023 the military retained power, it contradicts the initial promise of the Oligui transition government to return power to civilian rule.

The research outcomes are essential for understanding the intricate dynamics of dynastic authoritarianism and military coups in Gabon. They emphasize the relationship between colonial history, socioeconomic factors, and external influences shaping the political landscape. By elucidating these issues, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges of democratic processes in postcolonial Africa. The insights from this study also inform policymakers, governance actors, and civil society organizations advocating for democratic governance and political accountability in Gabon and beyond.

Conclusion

This paper explored the military coup in Gabon within the context of monolithic authoritarianism. In particular, it aimed to understand the historical sources of contemporary authoritarian rule, the military's influence on governance and citizens' perceptions, and the socioeconomic factors that facilitated military intervention. The findings address the research question by identifying multiple factors that contributed to the persistence of monolithic authoritarian rule under the Bongo dynasty from 1967 to 2019, and how exploitative governance practices triggered military intervention, a move welcomed by a disenfranchised Gabonese population.

The research outcomes both support and diverge from previous studies in significant ways. While scholars have previously acknowledged the historical endurance of authoritarianism in Gabon, this study highlights the military's role as an active political stakeholder and the public's ambivalent perception of military rule. Elite coalition dynamics further enhance understanding of how military and political elites interact to maintain authoritarian governance, a nuance that previous studies have often overlooked. This paper also emphasizes socioeconomic inequalities that aggravate public discontent and create conditions conducive to military intervention, resonating with existing theories while offering new insights into the dynamics of public perception.

The analysis of Gabon's case reveals that preventing political instability and coups in Africa depends on identifying and addressing warning signs promptly and effectively. It also underscores the need for Gabon's transition to be used proactively to enhance political and economic freedoms and respond to fundamental popular grievances. Using political transition as a means of coup prevention provides long-term prospects for stability and reconciliation. To achieve this, the political transition should be designed with coup prevention in mind. Such a strategy — comprising diplomatic, political, and security measures — is essential for ECCAS. While stakeholders in Gabon prioritize democratic principles alongside political stability, it is crucial to integrate civil society into political discourse to promote accountability and transparency.

However, this research's reliance on secondary data may limit the depth of understanding of Gabonese citizens' lived experiences and perceptions, representing a key limitation. Further research should consider primary data sources to obtain a more nuanced understanding of public sentiment and civil-military relations in Gabon. Additionally, investigating the impact of regional dynamics and external factors on Gabon's political landscape could provide further insight into the complexities of authoritarian governance.

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