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Political Science Honors Thesis  
Layperson Summary

**Coups d’état in Africa: What makes a coup d’état successful?**

Since independence, the African continent has been politically unstable. The frequent occurrence of coup plots and the political role of the military in the affairs of the state have contributed to the political turmoil that most African countries encounter. There are many factors that explained this instability such as: a legacy of colonialism, political and economic injustice by leaders who exploit their own lands and resources to the detriment of their citizens, the emergence of a group of people referred to as “elite” who manage state resources, the political feuds and in-fighting between different ethnic groups linked by traditional and historical ties and the ubiquitous power of the military that gradually became a symbol of threat, and defense. A coup d’état is defined as a sudden attempt by a group of people to overthrow a government in place, usually through violence. In other words, it is a change of governmental leadership by force, an unconstitutional method of succession mainly used by the military. In this paper, I’m asking the following question: what make coups d’état successful in Africa?

Although there have been bloodless coups in the history of Africa, the vast majority of coups bear the mark of violence. It can be labeled as successful, attempted or unsuccessful. In any event, the occurrence of a successful coup d’état, or the thought of engaging in a coup d’état, can be spurred on by so many factors that vary across African countries. However, in most cases, the military plays a dual role of a defender of the constitution and at the same time can begin a mutiny.

In this paper, I will examine 18 coup attempts in Africa during the post-1990 and compare those that were successful to those that were not. I will focus on the specific conditions that lead
some coup attempts to be successful. The 1990 period is significant because all African countries were no longer under colonial domination. Also, the Cold War was over and coups were no longer backed by external support. During that period, a wave of democratization emerged in Africa which included constitutional reforms and the possibility of multiparty elections.

Through a comparative case analysis from the period of 1990 until now, I will build upon other researchers’ analysis and generate some theories on the conditions that favor successful coups d’état.