

Remembering sub-Saharan Africa's first military coup d'état fifty years on

Syerramia Willoughby looks at the circumstances surrounding the first coup d'état and assassination on the African continent after independence.

On 13 January 1963, Togo's first President Sylvanus Olympio was shot down outside the US Embassy in Lomé while fleeing from dissatisfied soldiers who were conducting a coup d'état. This event is remembered not only as the first successful military overthrow in sub-Saharan Africa, but it was also the first time that a country's leader had been assassinated during a coup d'état.¹



The first President of Togo Sylvanus Olympio meets the then US President John Kennedy

The response to the actions of a small group of Togolese soldiers led by Emmanuel Bodjollé and Étienne (later Gnassingbé) Eyadema is one that might surprise a generation of Africans raised on a diet of military revolts. Not only did other African leaders swiftly condemn the coup d'état, Tanganyika's Julius Nyerere wrote to the UN, calling for the new Togo administration to be left out in the cold.

“After the brutal murder of President Olympio, the problem of recognition of a successor government has arisen. We urge no recognition of a successor government until satisfied first that the government did not take part in Olympio's murder and second that there is a popularly elected government.”

This event cast a cloud over the founding of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) in May of that year. The chair that would have been occupied by Olympio was left conspicuously empty in the Conference Hall. It was supposed to be a warning to potential coup makers that military overthrows and assassinations would not be tolerated on the continent. Rather than act as a deterrent, that act by the Togolese soldiers proved to be the beginning of a tidal wave with **an average of 25 coup d'états taking place on African soil every decade from the 60s to the 90s**. In fact, of the 32 countries who signed the OAU charter in 1963, 26 had experienced military coups by the end of the 90s, most of them more than once.

In the immediate aftermath of events in Togo, Ghana was implicated in the coup d'état and assassination, but no evidence was gathered to support these allegations. A Washington Post editorial entitled *Murder in Lomé*, while examining various theories for the cause of Olympio's murder, reported, "It is the third possibility that finds unofficial credence all over Africa – that Mr Olympio was struck down at the order of President Nkrumah of Ghana. Mr Nkrumah wants to annex Togo. His most formidable obstacle has been President Olympio. In the past weeks, Ghana has made against Togo what appeared to be a prelude to war. ... Can it be that Mr Nkrumah has decided that a putsch might succeed where an invasion might fail?"

The relationship between Olympio and Nkrumah had been strained for some time. Olympio had hopes of uniting the Ewe people in French and British Togoland. However, Nkrumah destroyed that dream when he courted British Togoland and in 1956, a plebiscite was held in the territory voted for a union with the Gold Coast. This caused a rift between the two West African leaders with Olympio calling Nkrumah the "Black Imperialist". They failed to resolve their differences, blaming failed assassination attempts on each other and hosting political exiles from the other's countries.

Interview of Sylvanus Olympio on NBC Part 1/2



During his short presidency, Olympio employed austerity economics in the realisation that Togo, small in size and poor in resources, had to develop slowly so that it would not become dependent on outside money. It could be said that it was his austere policies that triggered his downfall.

When Togolese soldiers who had been serving in the French army returned home, he refused to expand Togo's military force of 250 to accommodate them. (Olympio had originally intended to disband the Togolese army after independence viewing them as a luxury the country could not

afford.) Bodjollé and Eyadema were prominent members of the returnees who went on to plot an ultimately successful military overthrow.

In his paper, *The negative image of Africa's military*, Kenneth M Grundy puts it this way, "What seems so pathetic is that there is no evidence that they had any definite plans in mind for replacing the government they overthrew, or even that they had actually planned to assassinate the President. Apart from some narrow, short term demands, the coup was purposeless."

In the end, Olympio's brother-in-law and political rival Nicholas Grunitzky was recalled from exile to take over Togo's leadership. He lasted in the post until 1967 before being deposed by Eyadema on the fourth anniversary of Olympio's assassination. This time though, the coup was bloodless.

Following the 1967 coup d'état, Eyadema took on the reins of power and at his death in 2005 was Africa's longest serving ruler.

Footnotes

¹While it is true that DR Congo's Patrice Lumumba was assassinated two years earlier and a soldier, Mobutu Sese Seko seized power, it was not a typical military takeover as it is believed to be part of a Western conspiracy by Western powers.

Sources

Nyerere and Africa: End of an Era by Godfrey Mwakikagile

The negative image of Africa's military by Kenneth M Grundy

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