

# UN Peace Operations and Unconstitutional Changes of Government

Albert Trithart and Bitania Tadesse



**Cover Photo:** Assimi Goïta is awarded the Grand Cross of the National Order of Mali during the inauguration ceremony of the president of the transition, June 7, 2021. MAXPPP/Alamy Stock Photo.

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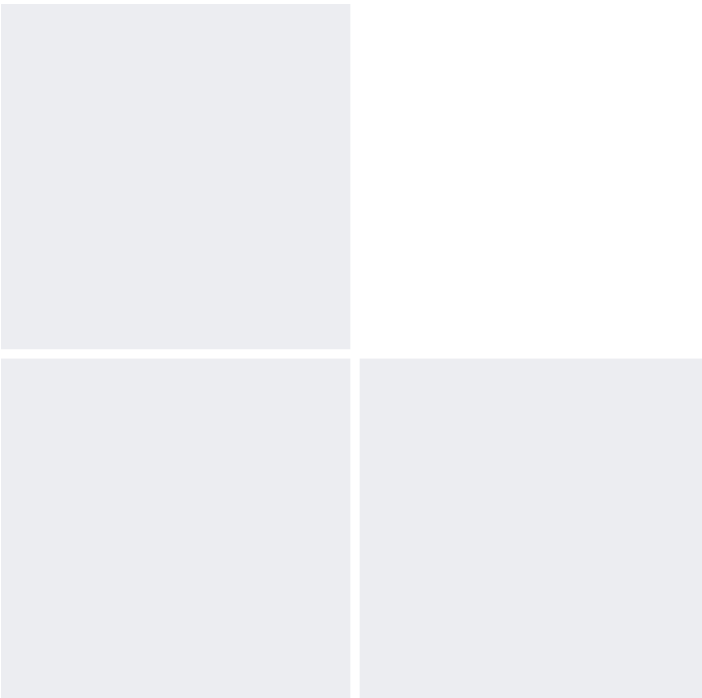
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## ABBREVIATIONS

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AU	African Union
DPO	UN Department of Peace Operations
DPPA	UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
OLA	Office of Legal Affairs
P5	five permanent members of the UN Security Council
RC/HC	resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator
REC	regional economic community
SRSG	special representative of the secretary-general
UCG	unconstitutional change of government
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNAMID	UN-AU Mission in Darfur
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNITAMS	UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan
UNSC	UN Security Council



## Executive Summary

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There has been a significant increase in the number of unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) since 2020. This presents a challenge for the United Nations, which has a presence in all countries that have recently experienced UCGs. In places like Afghanistan, Mali, and Sudan, it has also presented particular challenges to UN peace operations, which face the task of continuing to carry out their work amid a political crisis and using their good offices to facilitate a peaceful return to constitutional order.

UN peace operations often find themselves playing a prominent role in helping to resolve the political crisis following a UCG. This may lead them to shift their focus toward political engagement with the de facto authorities. However, this shift in engagement comes with challenges. Missions have to build relationships with the de facto authorities while navigating questions around how to avoid legitimizing them. They may also have to adapt their political strategies, particularly in contexts where the new authorities are not interested in short-term transitions to civilian rule followed by elections. Adapting these strategies can be especially challenging if the new authorities take actions that complicate their relationship with the UN.

UN missions' efforts to use their good offices to engage with de facto authorities may also be constrained by other international, domestic, and regional actors. For example, growing geopolitical divisions in the Security Council have complicated missions' engagement following UCGs, especially if the council does not change missions' mandates. In Africa, regional organizations working alongside missions can both enhance their legitimacy among some constituencies and complicate their engagement with military authorities.

Because the trends driving the recent increase in UCGs seem likely to continue, UN peace operations will have to continue adapting their approach to engagement with de facto authorities and navigating political transitions. To that end, they could consider the following lessons:

- **A principled approach at the highest levels of the UN:** While some UCGs may bring to power leaders with greater political will to engage with the UN, they are almost always an indicator of growing political instability. The UN secretary-general, along with the African Union (AU) and other regional organizations, should thus continue adopting a principled approach to condemning UCGs.
- **A pragmatic approach for UN peace operations:** While the UN should take a principled approach to UCGs at the headquarters level, UN peace operations are well-positioned to take a more pragmatic approach to engaging with de facto authorities. They should take advantage of any openness displayed by the authorities to engage despite fears that doing so might legitimize them.
- **Planning for UCGs and reviewing political strategies:** Even if the UN is unable to prevent UCGs, it can better prepare for managing relationships with transitional authorities. It is therefore important to consider such scenarios in mission planning for potential and current operations and to conduct strategic assessments as soon as possible following UCGs to consider how to adapt and potentially identify a new direction for engagement.
- **The challenge of remaining impartial:** Fears of “legitimizing” de facto authorities stem from the assumption that those authorities are inherently illegitimate. Yet not all elected authorities have popular legitimacy, and not all authorities who come to power unconstitutionally lack it. UN missions thus need to factor public opinion into how they respond on the ground.
- **The need for a “One UN” response:** While there is unlikely to be a “one-size-fits-all” approach to engagement with de facto authorities across the entire UN presence in a country, coordination is needed to ensure UN personnel have a common understanding of core principles of engagement and a coherent approach to communication.
- **The limits of UN engagement:** Ultimately, the ability of UN missions to shape political transitions following UCGs tends to be constrained by factors outside their control. Regional organizations like the AU and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) tend to adopt a more principled response, raising questions about the extent to which UN missions should seek to link their engagement to that of these organizations. Missions also face competing pressures from member states supporting different political factions.





## Introduction

In the four years since 2020, there have been at least a dozen military coups d'état and other unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) around the world—a dramatic increase over the four years prior.<sup>1</sup> This presents a challenge for the United Nations, which has a presence in all the countries that have recently experienced UCGs. Member states in the General Assembly and Security Council need to decide whether and how to condemn the UCG and whether to recognize the new de facto authorities (see Boxes 1 and 2 for definitions). In the field, UN peace operations—peacekeeping operations and special political missions—and UN country teams do not play a role in deciding whether to recognize the new authorities. Instead, they face the task of continuing to carry out their work in the midst of a political crisis and how to calibrate their interaction with the de facto authorities, including how to engage with the new authorities without legitimizing them.

UN peace operations also face the challenge of deciding how to use their good offices to facilitate a peaceful return to constitutional order. Since 2020, UN peace operations have been politically engaged in all contexts where there have been UCGs, as they have all taken place in countries covered by UN peace operations mandates (including the multi-country mandates of regional political offices).

Despite the impact of UCGs on the mandate delivery of several peace operations, there has been limited external research on how UN missions have responded to UCGs or the challenges they face in engaging with de facto authorities. This paper therefore examines how UN peace operations have responded to recent UCGs, focusing on three cases: Mali, where a UN peacekeeping operation

(MINUSMA) was present during coups in 2020 and 2021; Sudan, where a UN special political mission (UNITAMS) was present during a coup in 2021; and Afghanistan, where a UN special political mission (UNAMA) was present during the Taliban takeover of the country in 2021. These missions were chosen given their sizeable field presences, which means they face different challenges than UN special political missions that have little or no permanent presence on the ground, such as the UN special envoy to Myanmar or the UN regional offices in West Africa (UNOWAS) and Central Africa (UNOCA).

The paper aims to identify lessons from the experiences of these UN peace operations following UCGs. While the focus is on peace operations, the paper also considers the response of other UN

In the four years since 2020, there have been at least a dozen unconstitutional changes of government around the world—a dramatic increase over the four years prior.

entities including UN country teams. These lessons can inform the responses of other similar types of UN peace operations in similar situations, including their approach to engaging de facto

authorities. The lessons are also relevant to member states and regional organizations, whose response to UCGs often shapes the response of UN missions. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the circumstances differ significantly from one UCG to another. The paper therefore focuses on exploring how missions have navigated overarching challenges related to UCGs rather than prescribing cross-cutting solutions.

The paper begins by providing a brief overview of recent trends in UCGs and how the responses of member states and international and regional organizations have impacted the responses of UN peace operations in Mali, Sudan, and Afghanistan. It then analyzes how these UN peace operations approached political engagement with the de facto authorities. The analysis is based on desk research and around twenty interviews with current and former UN officials and other experts.

<sup>1</sup> These included military coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Myanmar (2021), Chad (2021), Guinea (2021), Sudan (2021), Burkina Faso (two in 2022), Niger (2023), and Gabon (2023) and the overthrow of governments by non-stated armed groups in Afghanistan (2021) and Syria (2024).

### Box 1. What counts as an unconstitutional change of government?

“Unconstitutional change of government” (UCG) is the main term used within the UN Secretariat when referring to the removal and replacement of a national government through unconstitutional means.<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons “UCG” is generally preferred over “coup” is that it is a broader term (e.g., the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan was not a coup). Moreover, calling something a coup can have legal, diplomatic, and normative implications.<sup>3</sup> For example, UNITAMS faced backlash from Sudan’s military authorities for using the term “coup” in 2021.<sup>4</sup> The UCGs in Sudan also speak to the politicized and inconsistent terminology used in the UN Security Council, which used neither “UCG” nor “coup” in its statements on Sudan in 2019 or 2021, in the latter case settling on “military takeover.”<sup>5</sup>

The African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council, by contrast, labeled both of these as coups (and, therefore, as UCGs). This is because, unlike the UN, the AU has a formal definition of UCGs, reflecting its more principled approach. The 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance both defines what constitutes a UCG and establishes sanctions for any state where a UCG takes place.<sup>6</sup> The charter specifies five “illegal means of accessing or maintaining power” that constitute a UCG:

1. “Any putsch or coup d’état against a democratically elected government”;
2. “Any intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected government”;
3. “Any replacement of a democratically elected government by armed dissidents or rebels”;
4. “Any refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party or candidate after free, fair and regular elections”; or
5. “Any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government.”<sup>7</sup>

In practice, however, actions that would fall under the fifth category in the AU’s definition, which could include governments amending the constitution to extend or abolish presidential term limits or “self-coups” in which leaders keep themselves in power through unconstitutional means, tend not to be treated as UCGs.

## International and Regional Responses to Unconstitutional Changes of Government

The recent surge in unconstitutional changes of government has alarmed many international and regional leaders, including the UN. In 2021, the day after the latest coup in Sudan, Secretary-General António Guterres decried what he referred to as an

“epidemic of coups d’état.”<sup>9</sup> Since then, there have been four more coups, all in Africa. Yet the international and regional response to coups and other UCGs has been inconsistent.<sup>10</sup> While UN peace operations can and do use their good offices to engage with de facto authorities following a UCG, their actions are often constrained by other international, domestic, and regional actors. UN peace operations thus often find themselves in a difficult position, particularly amid rising geopolitical tensions.

2 For example, in the Secretary-General’s Decision on UN Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government (PC/2009/24) in 2009 and various Security Council resolutions dating back to at least 2003.

3 For example, some donor countries, including the US, are legally required to suspend aid to countries that have experienced a coup.

4 “Major Points that Triggered Sudan’s Anger from UNITAMS Report,” *Sudan Tribune*, April 6, 2022.

5 Security Council Report, “In Hindsight: The Security Council and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa,” July 1, 2022.

6 The AU first defined UCGs in the 2000 Lomé Declaration.

7 African Union, “African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance,” January 30, 2007, Article 23.

8 For a criticism of this gap in the AU’s enforcement of its definition, see: Solomon Ayele Dersso and Tsion Hagos, “Is the AU Addressing the Challenges to Effective Enforcement of Its Norm Banning Unconstitutional Changes of Government?” *Amani Africa*, February 10, 2023.

9 António Guterres, “Secretary-General’s Remarks at the Launch of the Emissions Gap 2021 Report Press Conference,” United Nations, October 26, 2021.

10 See, for example: Damian Lilly, “Does the UN Need a More Coherent Approach Toward ‘De Facto’ Authorities?” *IPI Global Observatory*, January 6, 2023.

### Box 2. What are de facto authorities?

“De facto authorities” is a term often used to refer to authorities who:

1. Take over a state’s national government through a UCG;
2. Take over and govern part of a state’s territory as members of a non-state armed group; or
3. Declare part of a state’s territory as an independent state.

This paper only considers the first category of de facto authorities. In theory, in the context of the UN and UCGs, the term “de facto authorities” distinguishes these authorities from the “de jure authorities” recognized by the UN General Assembly’s Credentials Committee. From the UN’s perspective, this distinction ends once the Credentials Committee recognizes the representatives of the new authorities as the official state representatives in New York. At that point, they may still be referred to as “transitional authorities” until elections are held.

In practice, UN officials do not widely use the term “de facto authorities” in external communications about UCGs. The exception is Afghanistan, where the Taliban authorities are regularly (though not universally) referred to as the “de facto authorities” in UN reports, upon the advice of the UN Office of Legal Affairs (OLA).<sup>11</sup> This reflects the fact that the Taliban government has not yet been recognized by the Credentials Committee. However, the UN does not use this term in official documents to refer to the military junta in Myanmar, which also has not yet been recognized by the Credentials Committee. This speaks to broader disagreements over the use of the term. In Myanmar, some have criticized the labeling of the military junta as the de facto authorities considering they do not control most of the country’s territory.<sup>12</sup> Some Security Council members have also expressed concern that describing the Taliban as the de facto authorities could confer them legitimacy and imply de facto recognition of the regime.<sup>13</sup>

## Recent Trends in Unconstitutional Changes of Government

Before 2020, the frequency of coups seemed to be on a positive trajectory: since the 1990s, the number of coups and coup attempts had steadily fallen, and in the decade 2010–2019, the annual prevalence of coups reached its lowest level ever. (see Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, most of the coups that occurred in this decade were so-called “democratic coups” fueled by popular discontent with authoritarian rulers, including coups in Niger in 2010, Egypt in 2011, Burkina Faso in 2014, Zimbabwe in 2017, and Sudan in 2019. All of these coups led to some sort of civilian-led administration (or joint civilian-

military administration, in the case of Sudan) within sixteen months (and in less than one month in the case of Burkina Faso).

This trend reversed in 2020, starting with the coup in Mali. In the following four years, there have been coups in Myanmar, Chad, Mali (again), Guinea, and Sudan in 2021; two coups in Burkina Faso in 2022; and coups in Niger and Gabon in 2023.

Beyond coups, there have also been UCGs in Afghanistan in 2021 and Syria in 2024 after those countries’ governments were overthrown by non-state armed groups. These UCGs

have differed in significant ways. For example, some of the ousted governments had been democratically elected (though with varying degrees of popular legitimacy), while others had been authoritarian. Moreover, some of the UCGs

None of the unconstitutional changes of government since 2020 has yet led to a transitional to democratic civilian rule.

<sup>11</sup> Interview #3 with UN official, March 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, “How the UN Is Failing Myanmar,” October 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Security Council Report, “Afghanistan: Vote on Draft Resolution on UNAMA’s Mandate,” March 2022.

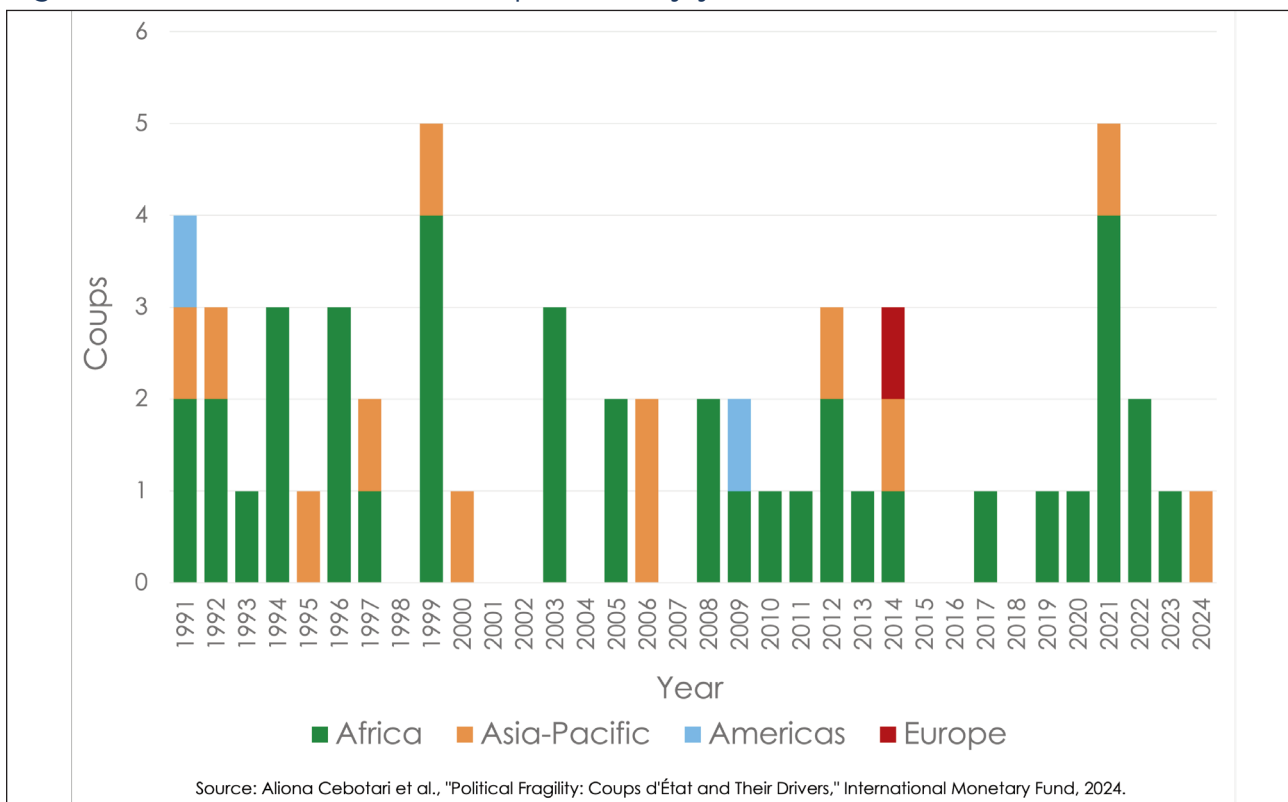
<sup>14</sup> Aliona Cebotari et al., “Political Fragility: Coups d’État and Their Drivers,” International Monetary Fund, February 2024.

were celebrated by a majority of the population (especially the coups in Mali), while others were deeply unpopular or highly polarizing (including the coups in Myanmar and Sudan and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan).<sup>15</sup>

But all the UCGs since 2020 share one thing in common: None of them has led to a transition to democratic civilian rule, and few have even led to firm commitments to move in this direction. This is

in part a reflection of geopolitical shifts that allow the leaders who come to power following UCGs to seek out alternative international partners. In some cases, it also reflects the depth of public frustration with the inability of the previous civilian rulers to address basic security and socioeconomic challenges. More broadly, the entrenchment of these leaders comes alongside a global rise in more authoritarian governance over the past two decades.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 1. Number of successful coups d'état by year



### Box 3. The international response to UCGs

The international response to recent UCGs among member states, both bilaterally and in intergovernmental bodies, has been inconsistent. While the UN secretary-general has condemned every recent coup, the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council have not always been as vocal.

The UN General Assembly has been especially quiet in addressing coups. While it passed a resolution expressing concern about the actions of the military against the civilian government in Myanmar in 2021

<sup>15</sup> According to a UN Development Programme (UNDP) survey, 79 percent of Malians supported that country's 2021 coup, and only 4 percent opposed it. By contrast, only 23 percent of Sudanese supported that country's 2021 coup, while 33 percent opposed it (the plurality of respondents in Sudan were neither supportive nor opposed). UNDP, "Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa," 2023, p. 102. In Myanmar, confidence in the national government plummeted from 86 percent to 28 percent after the 2021 coup. RJ Reinhart, "Post-Coup Myanmar: Confidence in Government Crashes," Gallup, February 1, 2022. While there is no survey data on support for Afghanistan's government before and after the Taliban takeover, the population's reported pessimism and suffering have risen especially among women. Khorshied Nusratty and Julie Ray, "Freedom Fades, Suffering Remains for Women in Afghanistan," Gallup, November 10, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Marina Nord et al., "Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization—Democracy Trumped?" V-Dem Institute, March 2025; Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights," February 2025.

(without using the word “coup”), it has not passed similar resolutions on any other coups in over a decade.<sup>17</sup> Beyond resolutions, a key role of the General Assembly following UCGs has been to decide who should be allowed to represent the respective state within the General Assembly, which is decided through the UN Credentials Committee. All UN member states send the secretary-general a list of names of their delegates to the UN, and these names have to be approved by the nine-member Credentials Committee. The Credentials Committee has regularly faced disputes following UCGs when both the new authorities and the ousted government both submit a list of names.<sup>18</sup> In most recent cases of UCGs, the representatives of the new authorities have been credentialed relatively quickly (and in the case of Mali, the new authorities following both the 2020 and 2021 coups left the existing credentialed UN ambassador in place). The exceptions are Afghanistan and Myanmar, which are still represented by the incumbent UN delegations from the ousted governments rather than the de facto authorities currently in power.

While the Security Council has responded more often to UCGs than the General Assembly, it also has a record of inconsistent action.<sup>19</sup> In 2021, the UN secretary-general called out the council for its “difficulties in taking strong measures” against coups.<sup>20</sup> The council was silent on the coups in Chad and Guinea in 2021 and Gabon in 2023, reflecting in part that these countries are not on its regular agenda. In response to other recent coups, the council issued press statements. Some of these explicitly condemned the coups (Mali in 2020 and 2021 and Niger in 2023), while the others only expressed concern (Sudan and Myanmar in 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022). All of them except the statement on Myanmar in 2021 called for a return to constitutional order. The council has not issued a stronger *presidential* statement condemning a UCG since the 2020 coup in Mali. The council has also not explicitly condemned the armed overthrow of the governments in Afghanistan or Syria. In 2024, however, the Security Council did express its support for the role of UNOWAS’s good offices in responding to UCGs in West Africa and the Sahel.<sup>21</sup>

The council’s inconsistent and weak response to recent UCGs reflects in part the differences in approach among its five permanent members (P5). Among the P5 countries, the US has the strictest protocols for suspending aid following coups and imposing targeted sanctions against individuals and entities responsible for the coup, including travel bans and asset freezes. The US activated this protocol following the recent coups in Mali, Myanmar, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Gabon, and Niger, though sometimes with delays due to hesitation over cutting military assistance to allies. The US did not label the UCGs in Chad or Sudan as coups.<sup>22</sup> In Afghanistan, several Taliban figures were already under US and UN sanctions even before they took over.

By contrast, China and Russia have generally been more hesitant to condemn UCGs, and Russia has sometimes embraced them. Following recent coups in the Sahel, Russia formed strong partnerships with most of the new military regimes, offering direct security assistance to the authorities in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. China’s response to UCGs in Africa and elsewhere has tended to be pragmatic, guided by noninterference and adaptability to changing regimes rather than an effort to shape outcomes.<sup>23</sup> In Myanmar, China joined Russia in blocking the Security Council from condemning the coup or from adopting sanctions against coup leaders.<sup>24</sup>

17 The General Assembly also did not explicitly condemn the Taliban for overthrowing the Afghan government, though it expressed concern over the situation in the country.

18 Catherine Amirfar, Romain Zamour, and Duncan Pickard, “Representation of Member States at the United Nations: Recent Challenges,” *American Society of International Law*, August 10, 2022.

19 See: Richard Gowan and Ashish Pradhan, “Why the UN Security Council Stumbles in Responding to Coups,” *International Crisis Group*, January 2022; Security Council Report, “The Security Council and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa.”

20 Guterres, “Secretary-General’s Remarks at the Launch of the Emissions Gap 2021 Report Press Conference.”

21 UN Security Council, *Statement by the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PRST/2024/3, May 24, 2024.

22 Alexis Arieff and Nick M. Brown, “Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Applications,” *Congressional Research Service*, December 2023; Sarah Harrison, “The Complexities of Calling a Coup a Coup,” *International Crisis Group*, February 2022.

23 Jonathan Holslag, “China and the Coups: Coping with Political Instability in Africa,” *African Affairs* 110, no. 440 (2011). One recent exception was the 2021 coup in Guinea, which China strongly condemned due to its close economic ties with the country.

24 Anna Plunkett and Oisín Tansey, “Contesting the Anti-Coup Norm: ASEAN Responds to the 2021 Myanmar Coup,” *UC Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation*, July 2022.

Figure 2. Timeline of 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan

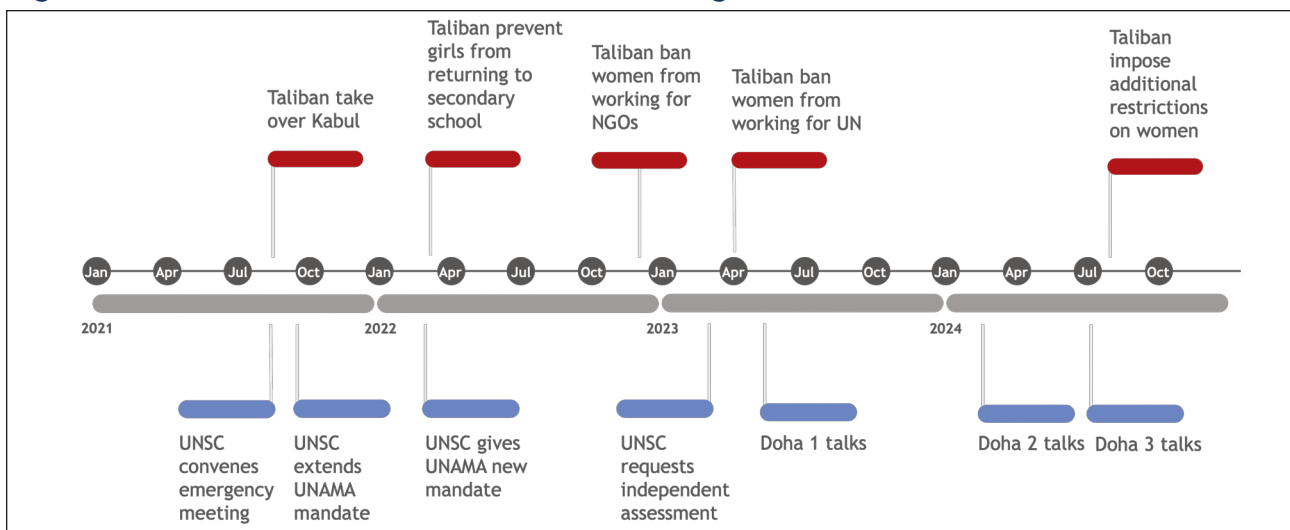


Figure 3. Timeline of 2019 and 2021 coups in Sudan

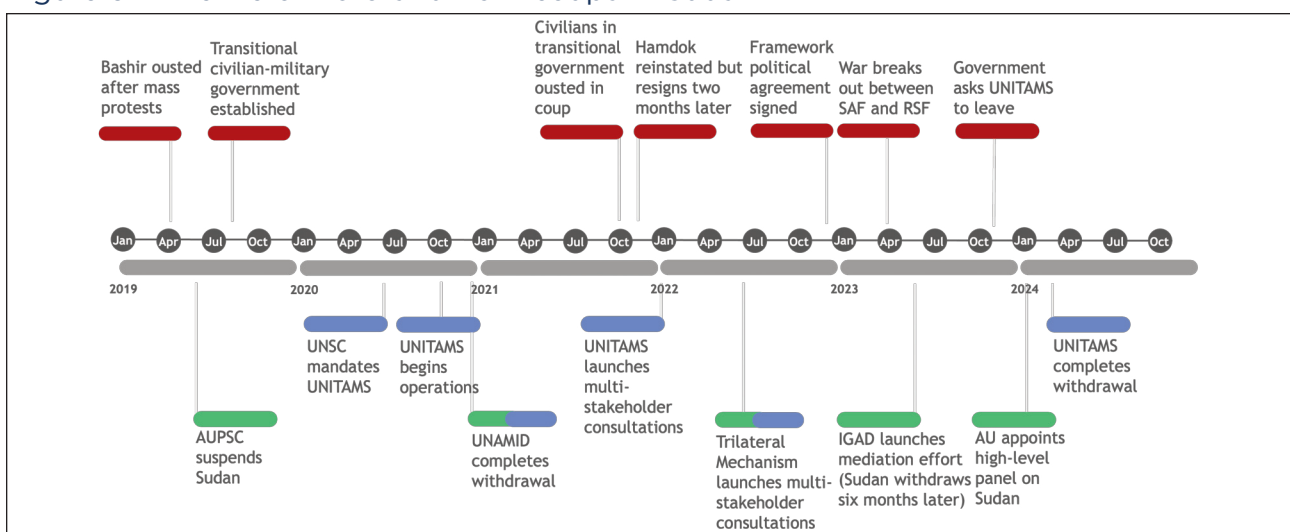
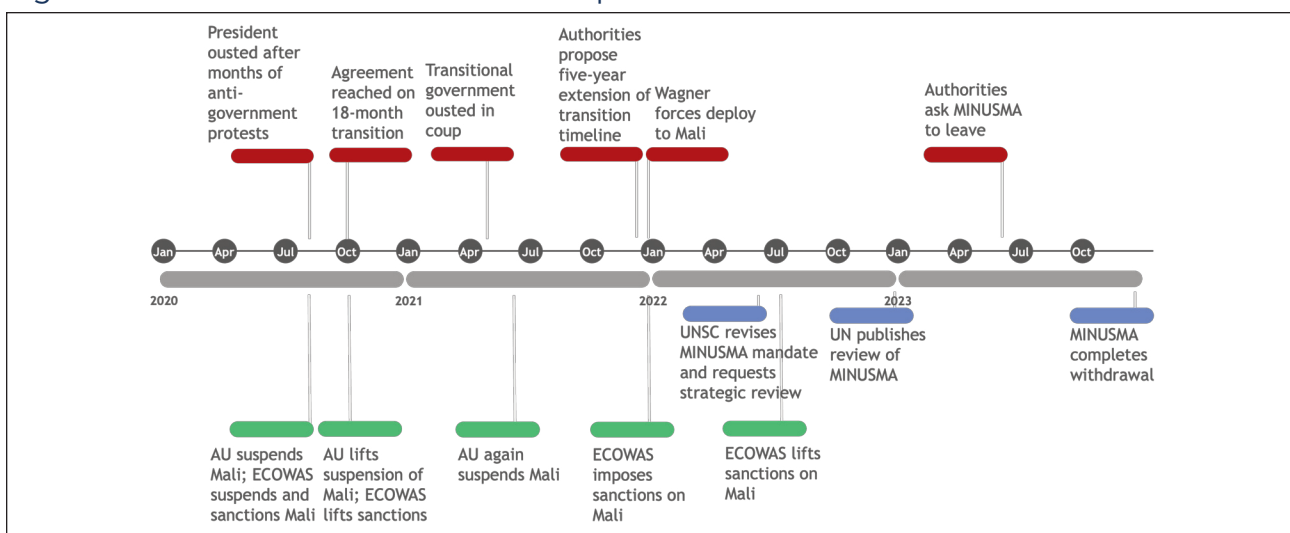


Figure 4. Timeline of 2020 and 2021 coups in Mali



## Navigating Geopolitics after UCGs

Historically, international actors, including states and international organizations, have played a crucial role in shaping the actions of the authorities who come to power following UCGs.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the international community's reaction to UCGs has long been inconsistent (see Box 3).<sup>26</sup> This response is only becoming more fragmented in the wake of rising geopolitical tensions over the past few years.

The actions of UN member states—particularly major donors, Security Council members, and influential regional states—can constrain the range of actions available to missions. One challenge is the cutoff of development funding from donors that follows many UCGs. Traditional donors often suspend direct budgetary support to the de facto authorities, and the World Bank and other international financial institutions often suspend disbursements and loans.<sup>27</sup> While some of this development aid has been redirected to humanitarian aid, and funding cuts from traditional donors may in some cases be partly offset by funding from nontraditional donors, there is almost always a net decrease in international aid following a UCG. These funding cuts range in severity from country to country. For example, while Afghanistan saw a sustained and almost complete shutoff of development funding, France was the only country to suspend all development aid to Mali following the 2021 coup, and this was in response to the new authorities' alignment with Russia rather than the coup itself.<sup>28</sup>

This cutoff has the biggest direct impact on UN country teams rather than the political work of UN peace operations. Some donors may even redirect

some of their development funding to the political engagement efforts of the UN mission. According to one UNITAMS official, the mission had more money than it needed following the 2021 coup as donors sought to support the mission's consultations and “make sure their money didn't go into a coup government pot.”<sup>29</sup> UN and bilateral sanctions also tend to be more of a barrier to humanitarian and development work than the political engagement of UN missions, as the UN engages with all actors that can contribute to ending violence, regardless of whether those actors are sanctioned.<sup>30</sup> In Afghanistan, UNAMA officials described the sanctions as more of a development and humanitarian challenge than a barrier to political engagement. One official reported that a sanctions expert visited the mission to assure them that they could engage with the Taliban without violating sanctions.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, funding cutoffs can impact missions indirectly. For example, UNITAMS was mandated to support the new Sudanese authorities in mobilizing economic and development assistance. This aspect of the mandate proved particularly complicated for the mission following the 2021 coup. While officials from UNITAMS and the UN country team advocated for traditional donors to maintain some of this funding, they found little appetite among donors to continue engaging in Sudan.<sup>32</sup> This contributed to growing tensions between the mission and the military authorities.<sup>33</sup>

The response of the Security Council also impacts the ability of missions to effectively engage the new authorities. The advice from the Office of Legal Affairs (OLA) on how missions can engage with the de facto authorities is grounded in the decisions of the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly

25 Clayton Thyne et al., “Even Generals Need Friends: How Domestic and International Reactions to Coups Influence Regime Survival,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (2017); Clayton Thyne and Kendall Hitch, “Democratic Versus Authoritarian Coups: The Influence of External Actors on States' Postcoup Political Trajectories,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 10 (2020).

26 Megan Shannon, “The International Community's Reaction to Coups,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 11, no. 4 (2015).

27 On the World Bank policy, see: World Bank, “OP/BP 7.30, Dealings with De Facto Governments,” June 20, 2001.

28 Lene Grønkvær, “Weathering the Storm: Why and How Development Financing Actors Should Stay Engaged during Political Crises,” Norwegian Refugee Council, p. 18.

29 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

30 See, for example: Agathe Sarfati, “An Unfinished Agenda: Carving Out Space for Humanitarian Action in the UN Security Council's Counterterrorism Resolutions and Related Sanctions,” IPI, March 2022; Alice Debarre, “Safeguarding Humanitarian Action from the Unintended Effects of Sanctions: Resolution 2664 and the 1267 ISIL/al-Qaida Regime,” IPI, November 2024.

31 Interview #11 with UN official, May 2024.

32 Interview #5 with UN official, March 2024.

33 Volker Perthes, “Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, October 2024.

(see below). This can create complications when, as in the case of Sudan, the Security Council does not explicitly label a UCG as such.

Complications can also arise if the Security Council does not update a mission's mandate following a UCG. UCGs require missions to adjust their activities—sometimes dramatically (see below)—but growing polarization has made it harder for council members to agree on new mandates when they come up for renewal. While the council did update the mandates of both MINUSMA and UNAMA, they left the mandate of UNITAMS unchanged.

The UN Security Council was able to update the mandate of MINUSMA in part because the 2020 and 2021 coups happened before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine deepened polarization on the council. The Security Council issued a presidential statement two months after the 2020 coup calling for a return to constitutional order within eighteen months and requesting MINUSMA to support the political transition within its existing mandate.<sup>34</sup> When the mission's mandate came up for renewal just over a month after the 2021 coup, the council updated the mandate to establish support to the political transition as a strategic priority.<sup>35</sup>

In the case of Afghanistan, the Security Council did not immediately change UNAMA's mandate, which came up for renewal just a month after the Taliban takeover. Instead, the council rolled over the same mandate for six months and requested a report from the secretary-general to inform subsequent mandate negotiations. After these six months were up, the council adopted a new mandate for UNAMA, reaching agreement just three weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine. This was a complete overhaul of the previous mandate, prioritizing the coordination of humanitarian

UCGs provoke political crises that increasingly bring geopolitical tensions to the forefront. This can put missions in a geopolitical trap.

assistance and donor support. The mission was also mandated to facilitate dialogue with the aim of “promoting inclusive, representative, participatory and responsive governance” and to “promote responsible governance and the rule of law.”<sup>36</sup> UN officials described this positively as a “good, broad mandate” that was “nice to aspire to” even if the elements related to governance and the rule of law may have been unrealistic.<sup>37</sup> This new mandate reflected the value of the mission's presence at both the national and the subnational level in the eyes of many member states, particularly Western states that had closed their embassies in Kabul after the Taliban takeover.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, member states on the Security Council and donor countries were divided over how much they wanted UNAMA to engage with the Taliban. These divisions hindered the mission's ability to engage early on. According to one UN official, “UNAMA missed the opportunity to set up structured channels for negotiations and engagement partly because there was so much division in the international community and in the Security Council over how to engage and what the red lines were.... The mission's remit and how far it can go is unclear.”<sup>39</sup> Another UN official said,

We can go blue in our face saying that dialogue is not legitimization, but apparently many people still don't agree with that. So what is engagement that doesn't legitimize or is an acceptable level of legitimizing? Every time you talk to them, you're recognizing that they are in power. How do you make that distinction and deal with the reality that they are in power? Countries' policies are being driven by the wish that they were not in power.<sup>40</sup>

UNAMA's room for maneuver became even more constrained after the Taliban's bans on girls'

34 UN Security Council, *Statement by the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PRST/2020/10, October 15, 2020.

35 UN Security Council Resolution 2584 (June 29, 2021), UN Doc. S/RES/2584.

36 UN Security Council Resolution 2626 (March 17, 2022), UN Doc. S/RES/2626.

37 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

38 Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024.

39 Interview #3 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

40 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024.



education and women's employment in NGOs and the UN. According to one report, member states largely confined UNAMA "to discussions over the management of the edicts with political inclusivity no longer part of the agenda." UN officials felt that a political track was needed, but "this was only possible with the agreement of member states."<sup>41</sup> While some regional member states had a more pragmatic approach to engaging the Taliban, many of these states viewed UNAMA as a Western institution and preferred bilateral engagement.<sup>42</sup>

The level of animus toward the Taliban among the US, the UK, and (especially) France also put the mission in a difficult situation when reporting to and briefing the Security Council. For example, while the mission tried to be balanced in its reporting, it sometimes faced criticism for reporting anything positive about the way the Taliban were managing the country. According to one UN official, this made it "very difficult to heed Brahimi's advice to tell the council what they need to know, not what they want to know."<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to MINUSMA and UNAMA, the Security Council did not change UNITAMS's mandate after the 2021 coup in Sudan, which reflected growing divisions on the Security Council in the two and a half months following its vote on UNAMA's mandate. While UNITAMS personnel talked to the Security Council penholder about changing the mandate, it became clear they would not get anywhere due to tensions among council members.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the mission was "stuck with a mandate that didn't make any sense in the political context," as one UN official put it.<sup>45</sup> The four strategic objectives remained the same, including support to a political transition that had been derailed and the mobilization of economic and development assistance that had been frozen. The resulting mismatch between what the mission was mandated to do and what it could do had negative consequences. According to one UN

official,

It opened the door for those on the military side to say that we weren't doing our job because we weren't mobilizing support; we also heard this from the Russians in the Security Council. The contrast was evident between October 2021, when we could say the council was supporting us, and after, when we didn't have the council's complete backing.<sup>46</sup>

These growing geopolitical divisions in the Security Council also increasingly complicated MINUSMA's engagement with the new authorities in Mali following the 2021 coup. The new authorities took a confrontational approach toward the West, particularly France, while inviting in Russian security forces from the Wagner Group. Despite its best efforts to position itself as independent, the mission remained closely associated with France, and France remained the penholder on Mali at the Security Council. While France did not pressure the mission not to engage with the Malian authorities, the mission suffered collateral damage from the deteriorating relations between the two countries.<sup>47</sup>

These challenges all point to the relative weakness of UN peace operations to shape political processes compared to member states, particularly considering the state of geopolitics. As one UN official asked,

Who is supposed to lead peace and political processes in this context? Should it be the UN as an independent player, or should it be regional organizations or P5 member states? The UN's good offices are often secondary to engagement by P5 or regional organizations. How can you be responsible for the final result when you don't have that space?<sup>48</sup>

While this challenge is not unique to missions confronting UCGs, UCGs provoke political crises

41 UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub and Humanitarian Outcomes, "Navigating Ethical Dilemmas for Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan," June 2023, p. 24.

42 Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

43 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024.

44 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

45 Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024.

46 Interview #14 with UN official, July 2024.

47 Written comment from expert, March 2025.

48 Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

that increasingly bring geopolitical tensions to the forefront. This can put missions in a geopolitical trap.

### Coordinating with Regional Organizations

Because regional organizations, particularly the AU and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), tend to be at the forefront of responding to UCGs in Africa (see Box 4), their responses can indirectly shape the actions of UN missions. In Sudan and Mali, the active involvement of regional organizations brought both advantages and challenges to UN efforts. In Afghanistan, by contrast, the absence of involvement by a strong regional organization in Central Asia resulted in minimal regional coordination to pressure the de facto authorities, leading to more ad hoc engagement by neighboring countries.

The principled approaches of regional organizations to UCGs can constrain the efforts of UN missions to be more pragmatic.

In Mali, the coups' impact on the mission was closely linked to ECOWAS's response. Following the 2020 coup, ECOWAS readmitted Mali and lifted sanctions within a month and a half after helping mediate an agreement on a transitional government. However, it faced a much more difficult situation following the 2021 coup. Immediately after the coup, ECOWAS chose not to take action beyond suspending Mali's membership; only two ECOWAS members advocated for sanctions, given that the elections agreed on after the 2020 coup were just eight months away. However, this stance began to shift when it became clear that the new military leaders would not meet the agreed timeline for restoring constitutional order. The arrival of Wagner Group forces from Russia further strained relations between the new authorities and ECOWAS leaders. ECOWAS finally imposed economic and travel sanctions on Mali seven months after the coup. By imposing these sanctions, ECOWAS inadvertently strengthened public support for the military junta. This made it more challenging for ECOWAS to

maintain effective engagement with the military authorities.<sup>49</sup>

ECOWAS's harsh stance against Mali complicated MINUSMA's political engagement with the new military leaders. As a former high-level AU official, the special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) saw value in adopting a "triumvirate" approach, with close coordination between the UN, the AU, and ECOWAS. A UN official observed that this strategy might have been effective if both the AU and ECOWAS—particularly ECOWAS—had influential representatives like the previous AU representative to Mali, Pierre Buyoya, who might have had more weight and credibility with Mali's military leaders (Buyoya had himself been a coup leader twice). Instead, the first ECOWAS representative was quickly declared *persona non grata*, and his replacement was much more cautious. As a result, MINUSMA found itself tied

to ECOWAS with little political upside. The official argued that instead of always striving for a unified voice, the UN could have leveraged its comparative advantage as the only organization from which the military regime could not be excluded, serving as a "fallback" if the engagement efforts of ECOWAS and the AU encountered difficulties.<sup>50</sup>

As with MINUSMA and ECOWAS in Mali, UNITAMS had a complex relationship with the AU and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) following the 2021 coup in Sudan. Like ECOWAS in Mali, the AU was viewed negatively by Sudan's military leaders for suspending the country after the coup, whereas these leaders had a better relationship with UNITAMS. UNITAMS therefore launched an initial round of consultations with Sudanese stakeholders without involving the AU. According to one UNITAMS official, this reflected mission leadership's prioritization of engagement with Sudanese stakeholders over engagement with the AU and IGAD. As a result, the AU felt sidelined from the process.<sup>51</sup>

49 Interview #7 with UN official, April 2024.

50 Interview #17 with UN official, July 2024.

51 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

For the next round of consultations, UNITAMS took a different approach, partnering with the AU and IGAD under the Trilateral Mechanism, much as MINUSMA had partnered with the AU and ECOWAS in Mali. The Trilateral Mechanism offered some advantages to UNITAMS, particularly in enhancing the legitimacy of the process. According to one UN official, some groups attempted to discredit the consultations as part of a Western-driven agenda, but this narrative was hard to sustain with two regional organizations involved. But the Trilateral Mechanism also faced challenges. As in Mali, the UN mission became attached to an organization taking a harder-line approach to the UCG. There was also a significant imbalance in resources between the partners. UNITAMS had a large team, while the AU and IGAD each had only a single envoy with one aide or deputy. This imbalance led to tensions and misunderstandings. Initially, there was also a lack of trust between the parties, and it took time to develop a common approach.<sup>52</sup> One Sudanese

political analyst was particularly critical of the Trilateral Mechanism, describing it as a forced partnership that effectively reset the consultation process originally led by UNITAMS on its own. This resulted in a fragmented approach that struggled to unify the various factions, and while the Trilateral Mechanism continued, it was eventually sidelined by a separate mediation process led by the US, the UK, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>53</sup>

In both Mali and Sudan, the principled approaches of regional organizations to UCGs constrained the efforts of UN missions to be more pragmatic. By partnering with regional organizations, UN missions may have enhanced their legitimacy among some constituencies while complicating their engagement with the military authorities. At the same time, sidelining regional organizations and pursuing their own independent approach would likely have come with its own set of challenges.

#### Box 4. AU and ECOWAS anti-UCG provisions

Compared to the more ad hoc approach of the UN and many member states, some regional organizations, particularly in Africa, have developed formal mechanisms for responding to UCGs.<sup>54</sup> For the AU, the 2000 Lomé Declaration serves as the foundational document defining UCGs and detailing the continental body's response mechanisms. The 2012 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance subsequently expanded the definition of UCGs (see Box 1). Under the AU's anti-UCG framework, a member state is immediately suspended if the AU Peace and Security Council determines that it has undergone a UCG.<sup>55</sup> Among Africa's regional economic communities (RECs), ECOWAS has the strongest anti-UCG mechanism.<sup>56</sup> In 2001, ECOWAS adopted the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which included a policy of "zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means."<sup>57</sup>

These frameworks have led the AU and ECOWAS to be more consistent in their response to UCGs than the UN. Since 2020, ECOWAS has suspended every member state that has undergone a coup, and the AU has suspended all but one. The exception is Chad, which the AU did not suspend following its 2021 coup, reflecting both the lack of a REC in the Central Africa region with anti-UCG norms and Chad's role in the fight against Boko Haram. The AU's failure to suspend Chad undermined the credibility of its anti-UCG norm and set a dangerous precedent. The AU and ECOWAS have also faced criticism for focusing on military coups rather than "constitutional coups" by sitting presidents and for not paying adequate attention

52 Interview #14 with UN official, July 2024.

53 Interview #16 with expert, July 2024.

54 The Organization of American States (OAS) also has formal provisions on UCGs. By contrast, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) does not have a formal anti-UCG framework and has faced criticism for taking a soft approach to the 2021 coup in Myanmar. Plunkett and Tansey, "Contesting the Anti-Coup Norm."

55 African Union, "African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance."

56 The only other REC with an explicit provision against UCGs is the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which is committed to "condemn and reject unconstitutional changes of government." While SADC suspended Madagascar in 2009 following a military coup, it did not suspend Zimbabwe following a military coup ousting Robert Mugabe in 2017. Southern African Development Community, "SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections," 2015, Article 4.1.13.

57 Economic Community of West African States, "ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance," December 2001, Article 1.

to the conditions that enable coups.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, ECOWAS has been criticized for being overly harsh in its response to coups. ECOWAS's harsh sanctions against Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, as well as its threat of military intervention in Niger, are widely seen as having backfired, driving all three countries to withdraw from the organization.

The approach of the AU and RECs to UCGs has not always aligned. For example, while the AU suspended Sudan following the 2019 and 2021 coups, the lack of an anti-UCG norm in IGAD undermined regional unity. IGAD not only lacked measures to address the coup but also actively advocated for Sudan's readmission to the AU, even when constitutional order had not been restored.<sup>59</sup> The AU also did not align with ECOWAS's response to the 2023 coup in Niger, declining to endorse ECOWAS's threat of military intervention.<sup>60</sup>

Unlike the AU and ECOWAS, the UN does not suspend member states following UCGs (or for any other reason). As a result, coup leaders from African states regularly vote in or address UN bodies and participate in the activities of the UN while being excluded from participating in the annual AU Summit of Heads of State and the AU's activities. For example, after the 2023 coup in Gabon, the AU suspended the country's membership, but Gabon continued to serve in the UN General Assembly and as an elected member of the UN Security Council.

Growing geopolitical divisions on the UN Security Council have widened divergences in approach between the UN and African regional organizations. For example, while the Security Council initially backed ECOWAS's response to the 2020 coup in Mali, China and Russia blocked the council from endorsing ECOWAS's sanctions against Mali in 2022. Similarly, the council's reaction to the 2021 military takeover in Sudan was less assertive than the AU's due to disagreements among members on characterizing the event as a coup.<sup>61</sup>

With six of its members currently suspended following UCGs, the AU has recently sought to strike a balance between principles and pragmatism. For example, in 2023, the AU decided to hold regular dialogues with states suspended due to UCGs, and in 2024, it tasked a new subcommittee with investigating the causes of UCGs and advising the organization on how to adapt its strategies.<sup>62</sup> Together with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the AU also launched the African Facility to Support Inclusive Transitions (AFSIT) in 2023 to facilitate political transitions, including following UCGs, through technical assistance, sharing of knowledge and lessons learned, and capacity building of civil society.<sup>63</sup>

## UN Missions' Political Engagement with De Facto Authorities

Following a UCG, international attention tends to focus on the reactions from places like New York, Addis Ababa, and national capitals. But UN entities

based in the country undergoing the UCG also need to decide how to react. As noted above, UN peace operations and UN country teams are not involved in determining the legitimacy of de facto authorities. Their focus is on how to continue delivering on their mandates rather than on determining whether to condemn or sanction the authorities or suspend a country's membership.

58 Amani Africa, "Critical Reflections on the Challenges to and Means of Strengthening the AU Norm Banning Unconstitutional Changes of Government," September 2021.

59 Workneh Gebeyehu, "3<sup>rd</sup> State of the IGAD Region Address," February 1, 2023.

60 AU Peace and Security Council, *Communiqué of the 1168<sup>th</sup> Meeting on Updated Briefing on the Situation in Niger*, AU Doc. PSC/PR/COMM.1168, August 14, 2023.

61 Security Council Report, "The Security Council and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa."

62 International Crisis Group, "Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2025," February 6, 2025.

63 UN Development Programme, "Africa Facility to Support Inclusive Transitions (AFSIT)," November 2023.

UN peace operations also often find themselves playing a prominent role in helping to resolve the political crisis. This may lead them to shift their focus toward political engagement with the de facto authorities. This section explores the challenges faced by MINUSMA, UNAMA, and UNITAMS during their initial engagement with the new authorities and the evolution of these challenges over the following several years.

## The Immediate Aftermath: Initial Engagement on Security Management

In the initial hours and days following a UCG, UN peace operations need to focus on the safety and security of their personnel. The level of security concern varies widely from one UCG to another. Following the 2020 coup in Mali, for example, Bamako remained relatively calm, and mission staff were back in the office the next day.<sup>64</sup> The situation in Sudan in 2021 was more tense. There was a lot of fear and uncertainty among mission staff, especially due to an Internet blackout that lasted nearly a month, making communication difficult. This initial period of frozen communication and concern over staff security consumed much of the mission's time and energy in the period following the coup. However, security concerns did not rise to the level where the mission considered evacuating staff.<sup>65</sup>

In Afghanistan, by contrast, as the Taliban advanced on Kabul, there was an internal debate within the UN about whether UN personnel should remain in the city. The Taliban had already taken control of all the provincial capitals in the nine days leading up to their takeover of Kabul, including

eleven cities with UNAMA field offices. This had largely transpired without major security threats to UN premises or personnel (most national and international staff had already been relocated from the field offices to Kabul).<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, anxiety was high, especially among national staff—female national staff in particular—and the UN decided to conduct a partial evacuation to Almaty, Kazakhstan. However, the Taliban took control of the city before the evacuation could take place.<sup>67</sup>

Despite their initial fears, international UN officials present as the Taliban entered the city reported that there was less confusion than expected, and it quickly became apparent that they were not facing the worst-case scenario. While some rogue Taliban fighters tried to enter the UN compound, UNAMA staff were able to get them to leave by calling their Taliban contacts in Doha. Within the first couple days, Taliban guards had officially been assigned to secure the UN compound. Shortly thereafter, the Taliban organized a convoy from the UN compound to the airport for the evacuation flight.<sup>68</sup> Around 200 international UN staff remained in the country, many of them from UNAMA, including the mission leadership and security and medical personnel.<sup>69</sup>

UNAMA's initial engagement with the Taliban was limited to basic security interactions. For example, UNAMA staff encouraged the Taliban to abide by diplomatic norms, including by respecting the privileges and immunities of the UN. There were only minor incidents, as the Taliban were reportedly keen to avoid reputational damage.<sup>70</sup> Within just over a month, all evacuated and relocated staff had been approved to return to Kabul and the UN provincial offices.<sup>71</sup>

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64 Interview #18 with UN official, July 2024.

65 Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024; Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

66 There were some exceptions, including attacks the UN documented on a UN compound and a UN convoy in Herat in July and August 2021. UN General Assembly and Security Council, *The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/76/328-S/2021/759, September 2, 2021.

67 For an overview of the UN's security management in the months and days leading up to the Taliban takeover, including contentious decisions around the relocation and evacuation of national staff, see: UN Department of Safety and Security, "Lessons Learned on the UN Security Management System during the 2021 Afghanistan Crisis," 2023, available at <https://www.passblue.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Lessons-Learned-on-the-UN-Security-Management-System-Final4070.pdf>.

68 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #8 with UN official, April 2024.

69 Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

70 Interview #8 with UN official, April 2024. The UN documented nineteen incidents of Taliban or criminals entering or attempting to enter UN compounds and offices in the three days following the Taliban takeover of Kabul. UN Doc. A/76/328-S/2021/759.

71 UN Department of Safety and Security, "Lessons Learned on the UN Security Management System."

While the initial security conditions differed in Mali, Sudan, and Afghanistan, in all cases the de facto authorities who took over sought to avoid major transgressions against the UN that might result in diplomatic fallout. This allowed key political staff from the UN missions to remain in the country and begin interacting with the new authorities. Early engagement on issues like security and UN privileges and immunities can provide openings to engage on more substantive issues.

### Legal and Political Guidance: Adaptable and Context-Specific

Since 2021, the UN Secretariat has had an organization-wide guidance note on engaging with de facto authorities (see Box 5). Beyond this general guidance, the Secretariat provides context-specific guidance to UN peace operations and UN country teams in the immediate period following a UCG. This includes legal guidance from OLA as well as political advice from the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) for special political missions or from the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) for peacekeeping operations.<sup>72</sup> This guidance covers the types of activities UN peace operations and UN country teams can continue carrying out, including activities related to the safety and security of UN personnel and activities that directly benefit the population. It also covers how to interact with the de facto authorities operationally. For example, UN personnel may be advised to mainly meet with lower-level, more technical officials and not to refer to the de facto authorities by their new government titles in formal communications.<sup>73</sup> UN peace operations and UN country teams may adapt the guidance they receive to the local context in consultation with legal officers in the mission.

The goal is to express principled disapproval of the UCG from headquarters, ensure internal coordination and coherence, and leave the rest to the specificities of the context.

This internal guidance is highly sensitive. In Sudan, for example, OLA's guidance document, including guidance on limiting contact with the new authorities, was leaked, creating tensions between mission leaders and the Sudanese generals.<sup>74</sup> It is also not always accompanied by concrete and realistic protocols around communication management. In Afghanistan, for example, UNAMA officials were advised not to publicize their initial contacts with de facto ministers, but information about these meetings often got out anyway when the Taliban posted photos to social media.<sup>75</sup>

OLA's guidance is based on the decisions by the Security Council and General Assembly, which, as discussed earlier, can vary significantly from one UCG to another. In Mali, for example, the mission never observed strict protocols around engaging with the new authorities. In Afghanistan and Myanmar, by contrast, stricter protocols remain in place because the Credentials Committee has not recognized the new authorities.

The guidance from OLA can also change over time to reflect developments on the ground. The guidance on Sudan following the 2021 coup was especially complicated, pointing to the potential for ambiguities around how to define UCGs and de facto authorities (see Boxes 1 and 2). The coup involved Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, a military member of the joint civilian-military Transitional Sovereignty Council, which served as the collective head of state, ousting Abdalla Hamdok, the civilian prime minister. UN officials were unsure how to respond, because technically Burhan had already been serving as a head of state before the coup. Two weeks after the coup, OLA clarified that UN officials should treat officials claiming to take over government positions as de facto authorities and limit contact (see Box 5 on what limited contact might entail). But two weeks after that, Hamdok

<sup>72</sup> Interview #6 with UN official, March 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Interview #5 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #3 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #8 with UN official, April 2024; Interview #11 with UN official, May 2024.

<sup>74</sup> Interview #5 with UN official, March 2024.

<sup>75</sup> Interview #11 with UN official, May 2024; Written comment from expert, March 2025.

### Box 5. UN policies and guidelines on UCGs and de facto authorities

Before 2009, the UN Secretariat did not have a policy on responding to UCGs. The demand for such a policy was prompted by a slight spike in coups in 2008 and 2009, coupled with concerns that the UN's response to these coups was internally inconsistent and unaligned with the responses of regional organizations. In 2009, the UN Secretariat's Policy Committee adopted an internal policy to improve coordination following UCGs. This policy committed the secretary-general to "a norm-based and principled position on unconstitutional changes of government." The main operational change was the requirement to establish an interdepartmental working group within twenty-four hours of any UCG to coordinate the UN's response and provide guidance.<sup>76</sup> DPPA takes the lead on coordinating the UN response in non-peacekeeping settings, while DPO takes the lead in peacekeeping settings. The working group also includes OLA and all relevant agencies, funds, and programs.<sup>77</sup>

While the 2009 policy was useful in the immediate aftermath of a UCG, it offered limited guidance on managing protracted transitions and addressing humanitarian and development challenges.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, following the spike in coups since 2020 and the growing length of post-coup transitions, DPPA, together with OLA, updated the 2009 policy. The main intent was to expand the scope of the 2009 policy beyond political engagement. The updated policy recognizes the necessity of "staying and delivering" on a broader range of UN activities following a UCG, including development and humanitarian efforts.<sup>79</sup>

In addition to this policy on responding to UCGs, OLA developed a guidance note for UN entities on engaging with de facto authorities in 2021. The note instructs UN entities to seek advice from DPPA, which will consult OLA and provide guidance based on the decisions of the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council. It emphasizes that the Secretariat cannot decide whether to recognize governments and that there is no legal requirement preventing the UN from interacting with de facto authorities. The guidance note does not specify how UN entities can or should engage with de facto authorities, leaving this to case-by-case guidance from DPPA and OLA (and DPO, in the case of peacekeeping operations). Instead, it lays out some general elements of past guidance, including acceptable purposes for interacting with de facto authorities and precautions that should be taken to avoid conferring them "legitimacy." It also lays out detailed case scenarios to help guide concrete responses by missions, depending on the situation. While the guidance varies from context to context, acceptable purposes for interacting with the authorities may include activities related to humanitarian assistance, the protection of civilians, peacebuilding and development programs that are critical to the local population, compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law, and good offices.

In situations of severe disruption to UN operations or threats to personnel, the secretary-general also has the authority to activate the crisis management policy. Since its introduction in 2023, this policy has only been invoked in response to a UCG in the case of Niger, where it remained active for around five months until the General Assembly recognized the credentials of the de facto authorities. Upon activation of this policy, the secretary-general promptly issues a formal statement to ensure coordinated messaging and to provide a centralized platform for guidance and advice to the UN country team. During such crises, an interagency task force convenes weekly to ensure cohesive action and response.<sup>80</sup> In 2022, the UN Sustainable Development Group also published guidelines for resident coordinators and UN country teams to support development planning in exceptional situations, including in the absence of clear, unified authorities with whom to coordinate planning efforts.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Notably, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations opposed punitive measures that would prevent countries from contributing troops to peacekeeping operations following UCGs. Oisín Tansey, "Lowest Common Denominator Norm Institutionalization: The Anti-Coup Norm at the United Nations," *Global Governance* 24, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>77</sup> Interview #6 with UN official, March 2024.

<sup>78</sup> Interview #12 with UN official, June 2024.

<sup>79</sup> Interview #6 with UN official, March 2024.

<sup>80</sup> Interview #12 with UN official, June 2024.

<sup>81</sup> UN Sustainable Development Group, "Guidance on UN Country-Level Strategic Planning for Development in Exceptional Circumstances," April 2022.

was reinstated as prime minister, and OLA advised that UN officials should again treat the government as legitimate—even though Hamdok had resumed this function largely in name only. When Hamdok resigned a little over a month later, OLA advised that UN officials should continue treating Burhan as the legitimate head of state. While UN officials generally found OLA to be helpful and responsive in providing guidance, this back and forth in the months following the coup created confusion and was difficult for UN officials to explain to their Sudanese interlocutors.<sup>82</sup>

Beyond formal guidance from headquarters, some UN officials also communicated with colleagues in other UN peace operations or UN country teams who had experienced UCGs or had experience engaging with de facto authorities. For example, DPPA facilitated information sharing between UNAMA and UN personnel in Yemen.<sup>83</sup> However, significant differences from one context to another can limit the utility of such exchanges.<sup>84</sup>

Apart from the initial guidance provided by UN headquarters, UN peace operations have operated relatively independently in setting their approach to responding to UCGs and engaging with de facto authorities. The goal is to express principled disapproval of the UCG from headquarters, ensure internal coordination and coherence, and leave the rest to the specificities of the context.<sup>85</sup> UN officials interviewed for this research did not indicate a need for more system-wide policies or guidance, emphasizing the importance of tailoring the approach to each situation. At the same time, clearer protocols around how to manage communication around the UN's approach to engagement might be beneficial to avoid misunderstandings.

### How Open Are the New Authorities to Working with the UN?

While the UN secretary-general expresses principled disapproval of all UCGs, the impact of UCGs on UN peace operations and UN country teams

usually depends more on who the new authorities are than on how they got there. In some cases, the new authorities may be more interested in working with the UN than the previous ones, while in other cases they may be less cooperative. Sometimes it is not immediately apparent how the new authorities will approach the UN. In all cases, UN missions can make it clear from the outset that they are open to engaging within the parameters set out by OLA.

The cases of Sudan and Mali demonstrate how UCGs are not inherently bad for UN missions in the short term; in fact, depending on the stance of the new authorities compared to the authorities they ousted, UCGs can create new opportunities for engagement. At the same time, any military coup tends to destabilize the political landscape, which can have unpredictable consequences, ultimately leading to both UNITAMS and MINUSMA being asked to leave.

In the case of Sudan, the 2019 coup brought down a government with a long history of hostility toward the UN, particularly the UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), and replaced it with an administration that viewed the UN more favorably. Even following the 2021 coup in Sudan, it was not immediately apparent whether the government would turn against UNITAMS.<sup>86</sup> The SRSG had developed a close relationship with the coup leaders, particularly Burhan, when they were serving on the Transitional Sovereignty Council. At the same time, civilian and military officials in the council had had diverging views on the mission, with the military leaders less enthusiastic about its work on issues such as civilian protection. Moreover, some of the old guard from the former regime of Omar al-Bashir came back into positions of authority, bringing with them their historical distrust of UN peace operations. This manifested itself in a reemergence of the same low-level bureaucratic harassment of UN officials that UNAMID officials had faced before 2019.<sup>87</sup> An added challenge was that UNITAMS was still in its start-up phase when the 2021 coup happened. As

82 Interview #5 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024; Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024; Interview #14 with UN official, July 2024.

83 Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

84 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

85 Interview #6 with UN official, March 2024.

86 Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024.

87 Ibid.; Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.



one expert observed, it “wasn’t in a position of power.”<sup>88</sup>

Like the 2019 coup in Sudan, the 2020 coup in Mali was not received unfavorably in the eyes of MINUSMA officials, even if they expressed disapproval in principle. While the previous administration in Mali had been democratically elected, it had become unpopular among the Malian public and was not an easy partner for MINUSMA. According to one UN official, “The coup in itself was not a problem, per se. It could even be seen as a solution.”<sup>89</sup> Another UN official described it as “a good scenario for the UN.”<sup>90</sup> Within twenty-four hours, the coup leaders had issued a communiqué indicating their desire to work with the UN. MINUSMA officials found that, compared to the previous civilian administration, the new authorities had more political will to engage with the mission.<sup>91</sup> Several weeks after the coup, the head of MINUSMA gave an optimistic briefing to the Security Council, stating that “there is every reason to hope for a successful political transition.”<sup>92</sup> However, the mission had little time to work with these new authorities, as only nine months passed before the 2021 coup, which sidelined the civilians in the transitional government and consolidated the power of a group of colonels who were less interested in working with the mission.

In Afghanistan, the UN mission confronted a completely different situation than in Mali or Sudan, as most UN officials had spent more than a decade viewing the Taliban as the enemy. Nonetheless, UNAMA did not face an entirely new set of interlocutors. The Taliban largely kept the same government structure that had existed before

they took over, with many portfolios managed by the same civil servants.<sup>93</sup> The mission also had already been engaging with Taliban leaders over the past several years, particularly in Doha, which had allowed them to establish workable, direct relationships and back channels. These existing relationships proved instrumental in the immediate wake of the Taliban takeover and helped avert more serious security incidents.<sup>94</sup>

The impact of UCGs on UN peace operations and UN country teams usually depends more on who the new authorities are than on how they got there.

At the same time, UNAMA personnel also encountered many new Taliban officials they had not interacted with before. As one UN official stated,

There was a whole new set of relationships to establish with characters who until that point had been actively engaged in attacks and threats to UN offices, personnel, and programs. There was considerable trepidation about what they would make of the UN, how they regarded their newfound responsibilities, whether they would adhere to diplomatic norms and human rights requirements, and whether they had any understanding of what their authorities and responsibilities were.<sup>95</sup>

UNAMA also confronted a divided Taliban with competing factions. The mission mainly engaged the Taliban officials running the ministries in Kabul, some of whom were relatively moderate (by Taliban standards). However, most power resides with the Taliban’s deeply conservative supreme leader in Kandahar, who is more suspicious of the mission than the Taliban officials in Kabul. The mission has been unable to engage with the supreme leader at a senior level due to his refusal to meet with almost all foreigners.<sup>96</sup>

88 Interview #2 with expert, March 2024.

89 Interview #7 with UN official, April 2024.

90 Interview #18 with UN official, July 2024.

91 Ibid.; Interview #7 with UN official, April 2024.

92 UN Security Council 8756<sup>th</sup> Meeting, UN Doc. SC/14320, October 8, 2020.

93 Though with some notable exceptions, including the replacement of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024.

94 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #8 with UN official, April 2024.

95 Interview #8 with UN official, April 2024.

96 Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024.

In all three cases, the UCG profoundly changed the authorities UN missions engaged with, for better or for worse. Ultimately, however, the fact that these authorities came to power unconstitutionally was not necessarily the main factor shaping the missions' engagement. Their engagement was more shaped by who these new authorities were and, as discussed more below, the actions they took.

## Does Engaging Risk Legitimizing?

One of the preoccupations of UN guidance on engaging with de facto authorities is how to do so

without “legitimizing” these authorities. This is especially sensitive in contexts like Afghanistan and Sudan where the new authorities are viewed highly unfavorably by many, both within and outside the country. In these cases, UN officials may debate whether they are legitimizing the de facto authorities even just by remaining in the country, as well as the reputational damage that engaging with the authorities could cause the UN. Such a debate took place in UNITAMS in the immediate wake of the 2021 coup in Sudan, when mission leaders considered whether they should threaten to leave the country and go to the Security

### Box 6. Preventing unconstitutional changes of government

The most effective way to address the challenges arising from UCGs would be to prevent UCGs from happening. As noted in a recent UNDP report on coups in Africa, “It is clear from recent events that stakeholders need to become better at anticipating and, to the greatest extent possible, proactively preventing” military coups as a form of UCG. The report suggests more consistently and robustly applying continental norms against UCGs, boosting the capacity of early-warning and response systems, supporting dialogue between political and military elites, and investing in national infrastructures for peace.<sup>97</sup> These recommendations tie into the broader UN agenda on prevention, which focuses more on armed conflict than UCGs.<sup>98</sup>

UN peace operations can try to avert or manage political crises that could lead to coups, including by monitoring for warning signs and using good offices to promote dialogue between political and military leaders to defuse tensions. In Sudan, for example, tensions were noticeably building in the Transitional Sovereignty Council at least a month before the 2021 coup. In response, the SRSR engaged in shuttle diplomacy between the generals and civilians on the council. The day before the coup, he met with a key general, warning of international consequences if there was a coup and offering to bring together members of the Transitional Sovereignty Council under UN auspices. The general reportedly accepted the offer, but the coup happened the following day anyway.<sup>99</sup>

The case of Sudan speaks to the limited leverage UN peace operations have to prevent coups, even if the warning signs are there. Calling on UN missions to prevent coups may thus be expecting too much of them. Coups are not easy to predict. Factors such as weak economic growth, political instability, conflict, and a history of coups increase the risk of future coups.<sup>100</sup> But knowing that a country is at higher risk of coups may not be especially helpful for UN peace operations, which lack the capacity or mandate to address most of these factors. There is also a risk that helping to “coup-proof” incumbents could have the unintended consequence of enabling authoritarian leaders—especially if the “coup-proofing” prevents a “democratic coup” like the 2019 coup in Sudan.<sup>101</sup> Ultimately, it is unlikely that UN missions could have prevented any of the recent coups, especially considering the broader sidelining of the UN as a mediator across numerous contexts.

97 UNDP, “Soldiers and Citizens,” p. 126.

98 See, for example: António Guterres, “Speech at 7857<sup>th</sup> Meeting of UN Security Council,” UN Doc. SC/12673, January 10, 2017; United Nations and World Bank, “Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict,” 2018; United Nations, “A New Agenda for Peace,” July 2023.

99 Interview #14 with UN official, July 2024.

100 Cebotari et al., “Political Fragility.”

101 Adam Day et al., “Peacebuilding and Authoritarianism: The Unintended Consequences of UN Engagement in Post-conflict Settings,” United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, p. 15.

Council to propose a withdrawal.<sup>102</sup> A similar debate took place in Afghanistan, both within UNAMA itself and within the UN country team (discussed in more detail below).

In MINUSMA, by contrast, there was no such debate, considering the breadth of the mission's presence and mandate compared to UNITAMS and UNAMA and the less polarizing nature of the new authorities. One MINUSMA official questioned the very premise of the idea that missions should worry about legitimizing de facto authorities: "You have to use the concept of legitimacy very carefully to avoid a slippery slope.... We tend to treat all elected governments as legitimate regardless of those elections' quality and all those that come to power through UCGs as illegitimate." He argued that the first requirement is to condemn the UCG, but the second requirement is to engage and support—to "accompany the return to constitutional rule.... We never worry about being careful about 'legitimizing.'" <sup>103</sup>

In all cases, mission leaders did not request the Security Council to withdraw the mission following the UCG and decided to pursue political engagement with the new authorities. This reflects a general predisposition to engagement across the UN system. This predisposition is especially strong in the humanitarian and development parts of the UN. As recommended in a recent UNDP report,

Coup responses should include a sustained commitment to reaching populations, even amid executive-level political crises. This can prevent compounded vulnerability, isolation and grievances that, in turn, may be readily exploited for political gain. Finding creative operational modalities is a necessary corollary to this principle.<sup>104</sup>

Questions around legitimizing de facto authorities cannot be divorced from the political context and public opinion.

The UN Secretariat, under the leadership of the secretary-general, is also predisposed to engagement. As one UN official put it, "The Secretariat maintained engagement even with South Africa during apartheid. Having the Secretariat maintain a link has been judged as essential."<sup>105</sup>

The decision to pursue political engagement may also be based on an assessment that the new authorities are open to some level of engagement with the mission. In Sudan, the leaders of UNITAMS got signals from both Burhan and Hemedti, the two generals who had led the coup, that they were interested in finding a way forward. As one UN official put it, "They didn't want to be seen as dictators or coup masters; they wanted to be seen as doing the right thing for the country—as the ultimate revolutionaries."<sup>106</sup> Mission leaders also felt that "there was no doubt that

UNITAMS, as a political mission, would be able to talk to and deal with everyone," especially considering the relationship the SRSG already had with Burhan.<sup>107</sup> Their logic was that "as long as somebody is willing to talk to you, maybe there's something you can do."<sup>108</sup> Similarly, in Afghanistan, many UNAMA officials were initially hopeful that they were dealing with a "Taliban 2.0" that was more moderate and interested in moving toward a more representative government.<sup>109</sup>

This assessment is not always shared by individuals and groups from the host state who opposed the UCG and may see UN engagement as legitimizing the de facto authorities. UNAMA, in particular, has faced pressure from activists in the Afghan diaspora, particularly women's rights advocates, who oppose international engagement with the Taliban. This has led to mutual frustration between UNAMA officials and some of the more vocal activists. Many of these activists advocated for UNAMA to remain in the

102 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

103 Interview #7 with UN official, April 2024.

104 UNDP, "Soldiers and Citizens," pp. 151–152.

105 Interview #6 with UN official, March 2024.

106 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

107 Interview #14 with UN official, July 2024.

108 Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024.

109 Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024.

country with an expanded mandate, but they have also criticized the mission's approach to engaging the Taliban—including in Security Council briefings while seated next to the SRSG.<sup>110</sup> As one Afghan opposition politician and activist remarked, UNAMA has “obviously met a lot of Taliban,” but “I wonder how many groups of women... UNAMA has met in the last six years.”<sup>111</sup>

While UN officials acknowledged that there is a wide range of perspectives among the Afghan diaspora, they saw some activists as too extreme, particularly those calling for complete disengagement with the Taliban or military intervention. UN officials also emphasized the “huge rift” between the perspectives of Afghan civil society activists in the diaspora and those who remained in Afghanistan.<sup>112</sup> Based on anecdotal evidence and surveys, they argue that most women still living in Afghanistan want international aid workers to remain in the country and assist where possible.<sup>113</sup> Despite suffering from the Taliban's draconian edicts, they would suffer even more from the suspension of international support. According to one UN official, “We abandoned women in that country. It's a shame for the international community. But the women who are there say to engage. The question becomes who we listen to.”<sup>114</sup>

In Sudan, UNITAMS officials also faced a polarized civil society that sometimes opposed their approach to engaging the de facto authorities. UNITAMS officials had strong connections to the resistance committees that had led the pro-democracy uprising in 2019. They also viewed these committees not just as civil society groups but as political actors and consulted with them after the coup.<sup>115</sup> However, some members of the resistance committees opposed the mission's engagement with the military authorities.<sup>116</sup> As one observer

noted, “UNITAMS lost the trust of civil society for doing workshops with military groups and lost the trust of military groups for being a representative of the West and pro-democracy groups. They were really between a rock and a hard place.”<sup>117</sup> There was particular backlash against the UN decision to welcome the agreement that brought back Hamdok as prime minister and to subsequently reengage with Burhan as the legitimate head of state.<sup>118</sup> When the UN continued treating Burhan as the legitimate head of state even after Hamdok resigned, many Sudanese were “wildly upset,” according to one UN official. “Having to explain to the Sudanese people the legal argument for why they did this—it's impossible.”<sup>119</sup>

In Mali, by contrast, MINUSMA did not encounter the same level of vocal opposition to its engagement with the de facto authorities. In fact, the previous civilian government had been so unpopular and the military leaders who took power were so popular that the mission may have faced greater domestic opposition for not engaging with the colonels.

Ultimately, questions around legitimizing de facto authorities cannot be divorced from the political context. Not all elected authorities have popular legitimacy, and not all authorities who come to power unconstitutionally lack it. While the UN and regional organizations should condemn any UCG as a matter of principle, UN missions need to factor public opinion into how they respond on the ground.

## Reassessing the Approach to Political Engagement

Once UN peace operations decide to remain and to focus on using their good offices, they need to decide how they will approach their political engagement with the de facto authorities.

110 UN Security Council 9137<sup>th</sup> Meeting, UN Doc. S/PV.9137, September 27, 2022, p. 7.

111 Daniel F. Runde and Fawzia Koofi, “An Armchair Discussion with Fawzia Koofi,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 12, 2022.

112 Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #3 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #11 with UN official, May 2024; Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

113 UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub and Humanitarian Outcomes, “Navigating Ethical Dilemmas,” p. 3. See also: Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting, “Only a Woman Can Understand Another Woman: Perceptions on Aid in Afghanistan after the Bans on Women Aid Workers,” June 2023.

114 Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

115 Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024.

116 Perthes, “Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices.”

117 Interview #2 with expert, March 2024.

118 Interview #5 with UN official, March 2024.

119 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

Following coups, the initial engagement often focuses on urging the authorities to agree on and implement a plan for returning to civilian governance. In Mali, MINUSMA leaders had conversations with the new military authorities to push for a transition to civilian governance and elections following both the 2020 and 2021 coups.<sup>120</sup> In Sudan, UNITAMS leaders focused their engagement on pushing the generals to release the prime minister and other detainees and stop violently repressing protests. They also made it clear that they “would seek to support a restoration of civilian government and constitutional order: in other words, to undo the coup.”<sup>121</sup> According to one UN official, the first few weeks were focused on telling the new authorities not to damage their relationships with the international community.<sup>122</sup>

This focus on pushing for a short political transition culminating in elections may have worked five or ten years ago; as discussed above, most coups in the 2010s led to relatively swift returns to civilian rule. But in all countries that have experienced coups since 2020, the coup leaders remain in power.

In Mali, despite movement toward a political transition after the 2020 coup, the military leaders dug in after the 2021 coup, bolstered by a high level of popular support that rose even higher in reaction to the harsh sanctions imposed by ECOWAS. In Sudan, within a couple months it was clear that the agreement to reinstate Hamdok was not working, nor were any other initiatives to restore civilian rule. According to one UN official, it took a while for mission leaders to come to this realization. Right after the coup, “it wasn’t obvious... that the baby was thrown out with the bathwater. In retrospect, that can be questioned.”<sup>123</sup> According to another official, “Particularly after Hamdok resigned, it became apparent they would have to take a different approach.”<sup>124</sup>

The stalling of efforts to mediate a quick political

transition underscores the need for UN missions to adjust their political strategies in the aftermath of a UCG and to regularly reassess their assumptions about what is politically feasible. In Sudan, UNITAMS shifted its approach to focus on broad-based consultations with Sudanese stakeholders. Two and a half months after the 2021 coup, UNITAMS brought together 800 Sudanese in more than 100 meetings over the course of six weeks. The focus of these consultations was less on “undoing the coup” than on bringing together a wide range of Sudanese stakeholders to identify where they agreed and disagreed. This was followed two months later by another series of consultations led by UNITAMS together with the AU and IGAD in an arrangement referred to as the Trilateral Mechanism (see above). Unlike the previous UNITAMS-led consultations, the focus of these consultations was explicitly to help Sudan “return to constitutional order,” reflecting the AU’s prioritization of lifting Sudan’s suspension. However, key civilian opposition groups refused to participate in the process, and it did not lead to an agreement.<sup>125</sup>

UN missions struggled to adapt their political strategies in contexts where the authorities were not interested in a short-term transition to civilian rule followed by elections.

As in Sudan, the mission in Mali reassessed its approach and adopted a new mission plan six months after the 2021 coup to guide its mandate implementation. In theory, MINUSMA should have had more leverage than UNITAMS to lead political engagement with the authorities because it was a peacekeeping operation with around 15,000 uniformed and civilian personnel. In practice, however, it made even less progress in advancing the political process, and it was apparent to some observers that the mission did not have an overarching political strategy after the 2021 coup.<sup>126</sup> Compared to UNITAMS, MINUSMA officials did not have the same level of connection to the military leaders who took over in 2021 and struggled to find an effective approach to engaging them. Because of the hierarchical nature of the

120 Interview #17 with UN official, July 2024.

121 Perthes, “Sudan’s Transition to War and the Limits of the UN’s Good Offices.”

122 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

123 Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024.

124 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

125 Perthes, “Sudan’s Transition to War and the Limits of the UN’s Good Offices”; Interview #14 with UN official, July 2024.

126 Written comment from expert, March 2025.

military, the mission was engaging in discussions with a very small group of colonels, and unlike the generals in Sudan, none of them had political experience. Their style of communication was also very different from what UN officials were used to. As one UN official put it, the approach required was to “deal with what you’ve got. What you think about them and what they’ve done—you have to set that aside.”<sup>127</sup> Another UN official echoed this point: “You have to be very careful about how you speak to them. Whether you like it or not, they enjoy significant popular support. You can’t just lecture them on human rights.”<sup>128</sup> It was not easy for UN officials to adopt this more pragmatic approach, however, and MINUSMA’s relations with the de facto authorities remained tense.

In Afghanistan, UNAMA had a different starting point for its political strategy than MINUSMA and UNITAMS. With the Taliban’s complete takeover of the country, a transition back to civilian rule culminating in elections was not a realistic short-term goal. This made the task of deciding on an approach to political engagement more challenging. A few months after the Taliban takeover, UNAMA had established itself as an intermediary between the Taliban authorities and the international community. However, some UN officials characterized its initial political engagement with the Taliban as weak, faulting the mission for missing early opportunities to set up structured channels for negotiation.<sup>129</sup> More than a year and a half passed between the Taliban takeover and the start of the UN-led Doha process aimed at addressing challenges surrounding the Taliban’s rule, and nearly three years passed before the Taliban participated in these talks. When the Taliban finally did participate, civil society groups were excluded, prompting widespread criticism.<sup>130</sup> UNAMA also faced criticism for not pushing the Taliban harder on human rights issues early on, with many Afghans seeing UN officials as naïve for expecting a “Taliban 2.0.”<sup>131</sup>

Overall, the mission found itself in a very difficult position trying to engage with the Taliban without being perceived to legitimize it. One way to navigate this was to focus on local-level engagement, but this came with its own challenges. As one UN official said, “It was not easy to balance engagement... with village elders and teachers and avoid... signing any agreement with the authorities at the Kabul level.”<sup>132</sup>

Across all three cases, UN missions struggled to adapt their political strategies in contexts where the authorities were not interested in a short-term transition to civilian rule followed by elections. They may have benefited from strategic assessments, which the UN has regularly conducted in the past to set a new direction following major changes in the context. However, no such assessment was conducted in Sudan. In Mali, the Security Council did not request an assessment of MINUSMA until eighteen months after the 2021 coup. In Afghanistan, it did not request an assessment of international engagement in the country until two years after the Taliban takeover. Earlier assessments might have helped UN personnel question their assumptions about the prospects for the political transition and identify a common approach for engagement.

## Internal Divisions over How to Engage in Integrated Contexts

There is not always agreement within the UN presence in-country over the right approach to engaging the new authorities. In general, the UN tries to decouple the political engagement of UN peace operations from the humanitarian and development work of the UN country team. This is relatively straightforward in contexts like Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon, where political engagement with the de facto authorities is led by regional political offices whose work is clearly differentiated from the UN country teams.

127 Interview #17 with UN official, July 2024.

128 Interview #7 with UN official, April 2024.

129 UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub and Humanitarian Outcomes, “Navigating Ethical Dilemmas”; Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024. Humanitarian actors have also been criticized for missing a window of opportunity for strategic engagement with the authorities at both the national and local level after the Taliban takeover. Danish Refugee Council, “Principled Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan,” May 2023.

130 On broader negotiations with the Taliban, see: International Crisis Group, “Rethinking Talks with the Taliban,” April 2024.

131 Interview #3 with UN official, March 2024.

132 Interview #11 with UN official, May 2024.

However, this can be more difficult in contexts with integrated missions, sometimes reflecting long-standing tensions between different parts of the UN system.

The UN faced the biggest internal divisions in Afghanistan. At the national level, there were divisions between the more pragmatic approach of humanitarian and development personnel who wanted to “stay and deliver” and the more principled approach of political and human rights personnel focused on upholding women’s rights. At the provincial level, some non-mission UN personnel saw the value of UNAMA’s brand, authority, and long-term local relationships in supporting humanitarian and development efforts, while others saw the mission as politicizing humanitarian assistance.<sup>133</sup> This led some UN officials, both within and outside the mission, to criticize humanitarian agencies for “overstating” the humanitarian imperative to justify completely separating their engagement with the de facto authorities from that of UNAMA, resulting in a disjointed approach.<sup>134</sup>

Divisions between the mission and the UN country team were less pronounced in Sudan. As many UN agencies tried to limit engagement with the authorities after the 2021 coup, the mission became a “lifeline to Burhan” for the UN country team, according to one UN official. Mission leaders would regularly engage with the agency heads to ask for their advice on which de facto authorities to engage and how to engage them to try to make sure everyone was on the same page.<sup>135</sup> At the same time, there were some coordination challenges between UNITAMS and the UN country team due to confusion over what the SRSG was responsible for versus the resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator (RC/HC) and who owned a common analytical and planning capacity. According to one UNITAMS official, there was no “robust and

All UN actors would likely have more leverage in their engagement with de facto authorities if they took a “One UN” approach.

centralized capacity for guiding the UN system response,” as the mission effectively operated as a member of the country team rather than leading it.<sup>136</sup>

Overall, some UN humanitarian and development entities may have taken the wrong lesson from Afghanistan, determining that a nonintegrated approach is best, as it allows them to more easily continue business as usual. However, all UN actors would likely have more leverage in their engagement with de facto authorities if they took a “One UN” approach. This would recognize, for example, that humanitarian and development funding has a political dimension, especially when there are international sanctions. Humanitarian and development issues can also sometimes provide entry points for political dialogue.<sup>137</sup> While many humanitarian actors resist linking political and humanitarian dialogue in order to protect their impartiality, this is not always practicable. As noted in a recent assessment of the humanitarian

response in Afghanistan, the humanitarian coordinator tried to “firewall” the humanitarian agenda from politics, but this proved almost impossible in a context where, for both the

donors and the [de facto authorities], aid and the control of aid is part of a political agenda.”<sup>138</sup> A “One UN” approach would allow UN peace operations and UN country teams to coordinate engagement across a wide range of issues.

## Reprioritizing Mission Mandates

While missions often prioritize the provision of good offices following a UCG, they also have to decide how to approach the rest of their mandated activities. This depends on the type of mission and the nature of the UCG. In Mali, MINUSMA carried on with most of its work. Following the 2020 coup, a transition plan and civilian president were in

133 UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub and Humanitarian Outcomes, “Navigating Ethical Dilemmas,” p. 24.

134 Inter-Agency Steering Committee (IASC), “Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to the Crisis in Afghanistan,” April 2024, p. 9; Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024.

135 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

136 Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024.

137 Sarah Cliffe et al., “Aid Strategies in ‘Politically Estranged’ Settings: How Donors Can Stay and Deliver in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States,” Chatham House and New York University Center on International Cooperation, p. 43.

138 IASC, “Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to the Crisis in Afghanistan,” p. 72.

place within about a month, and the new authorities had more political will to engage with the mission on key parts of its mandate, including support to the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. Even following the 2021 coup, the mission continued providing direct support to the government and implementing its mandate to extend state authority in the north of the country, even if this authority was now military rather than civilian.<sup>139</sup>

In Sudan and Afghanistan, the UN missions were much more constrained in the types of activities they could continue. Some activities that had previously been central to their mandates were no longer relevant. As one UNITAMS official stated,

The military had arrested our partners, and the constitutional document, which was mentioned in the mandate as a reference point, was unilaterally changed. Most of what we'd started to do was with the Hamdok government, and that was no longer functioning, so the whole purpose of the mission was changed from assisting an ongoing transition to trying to exercise good offices.<sup>140</sup>

All the UNITAMS staff who had been working on election preparations and constitutional reforms were reassigned to focus on engagement with the resistance committees.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, in Afghanistan, UNAMA's mandate to provide election support became irrelevant and was eventually removed.

UNITAMS and UNAMA also suspended most work that involved directly working with host-state authorities. UNITAMS quickly froze activities related to the rule of law and cooperation with the police.<sup>142</sup> UNAMA also froze its work on the rule of law. While the mission is still mandated to support the rule of law (though without reference to the government), there is reportedly debate within the mission over how and whether to approach this

area of work. As one UN official argued, "The kind of law the Taliban are exercising isn't something the mission should be supporting."<sup>143</sup>

In areas such as peacebuilding and protection, UNITAMS found ways to continue some activities, even if they became less of a focus than political engagement. UNITAMS continued supporting the implementation of the Juba peace agreement and ceasefire monitoring in Darfur, though with some challenges due to lack of political will among the de facto authorities.<sup>144</sup> The mission also supported peacebuilding projects in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile.<sup>145</sup> However, some projects could not move forward after donors suspended funding following the coup.<sup>146</sup>

UNITAMS also tried to continue its work on protection, but with great difficulty. The government officials responsible for the protection of civilians were arrested and replaced by military personnel. The mission therefore paused its plans to embed a UN consultant within the government to support Sudan's National Mechanism for the Protection of Civilians out of concern that doing so would legitimize the coup. As protection concerns escalated, the mission sought to reengage the military authorities on protection issues but struggled to gain traction. Eventually, the mission shifted its focus from the national level to supporting state-level protection of civilians committees in Darfur.<sup>147</sup> UNAMA also struggled to find ways to implement its protection mandate. UNAMA officials reportedly wanted to provide protection to Afghan civil society, but they felt they did not have the capacity to do this. According to one UN official, "There's nothing they can do. They feel helpless."<sup>148</sup>

While human rights monitoring and reporting can become more contentious following a UCG, these are also areas where missions can continue working without directly engaging with state

139 Interview #17 with UN official, July 2024.

140 Interview #14 with UN official, July 2024.

141 Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024.

142 Ibid.

143 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024.

144 Interview #5 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #10 with UN official, April 2024.

145 Perthes, "Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices."

146 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

147 Perthes, "Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices."

148 Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024.



authorities, and they remained priorities for all three missions. Human rights advocacy can also provide an entry point for engaging with the de facto authorities.

In Afghanistan, for example, UNAMA has found space to engage the Taliban on human rights. This was an area where UNAMA had already been engaging the Taliban before they took over, including through dialogue on international law obligations and alleged violations and UN fact-finding missions to Taliban-controlled territory.<sup>149</sup> Following the Taliban takeover, UNAMA continued to engage them on their human rights obligations, including by providing guidance on the treatment of detainees.<sup>150</sup> This engagement on human rights has even provided some entry points for engaging the Taliban on the rule of law. According to one UN official,

The Taliban are asking what the human rights are that they're being asked to obey. On that basis, they've done things like allow UNAMA to visit detention centers, which is performative, but still, they don't have to do it. Focusing on normative human rights standards is easier than talking about best practices of rule of law that vary a lot from country to country.<sup>151</sup>

The UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan, developed around two years after the Taliban takeover, also includes “rights-based interventions” as one of its three pillars. While this pillar is not popular with the Taliban, the mission did some limited consultations with the de facto authorities when developing the framework, and they reportedly had no major objections.<sup>152</sup>

In Mali, the mission also continued focusing on human rights after the coups. This included not only monitoring and reporting but also activities like training the police and security forces and supporting the ministry of justice. Even in the final

days between when the government asked the mission to leave and the Security Council officially mandated the mission's withdrawal, the mission was still training the army on human rights. According to one UN official, this type of support was “popular and appreciated.” What the authorities did not like was public criticism of the military's human rights record.<sup>153</sup>

## Responding to Contentious Actions by the New Authorities

After the initial months following a UCG, the UCG itself tends to fade into the background. The response becomes less about how the de facto authorities came to power than about what they do when they get there. In Sudan, for example, the mission's engagement with the military authorities became shaped less by the coup itself than by tensions between the coup leaders. In fact, according to one UN official, Burhan privately admitted around six months after the coup that launching the coup had been a mistake. By that point, however, Burhan and Hemedti were starting to focus on each other, and intra-military dynamics came to overshadow military-civilian dialogue, eventually leading to the outbreak of war a year and half after the coup.<sup>154</sup> Eventually Burhan declared the SRS

While human rights monitoring and reporting can become more contentious following a UCG, these are also areas where missions can continue working without directly engaging with state authorities.

persona non grata, accusing him of taking sides in the conflict and not respecting Sudan's “national sovereignty.” Several months later, Burhan asked the entire mission to leave.

In Mali, the mission's difficulties engaging with the new authorities after the 2021 coup stemmed more from the new direction they took with their international partnerships than the fact that they were coup leaders. As one UN official asked,

What is different for a peacekeeping operation in a country whose leaders came to power

149 Erica Gaston, “Relief Is Not Enough: A Mandate for Diplomacy in Afghanistan,” United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, October 2021.

150 Interview #3 with UN official, March 2024.

151 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024.

152 Interview #11 with UN official, May 2024.

153 Interview #17 with UN official, July 2024.

154 Interview #13 with UN official, June 2024.

through a coup? Do the modalities through which they came to power make a huge difference?... The key for Mali was not so much the fact that there was a coup but that the new leaders decided to completely overhaul their partnerships. If Mali did not make the choices they made, including bringing in [the] Wagner [Group], maybe the situation would have been different.<sup>155</sup>

In Mali, the military leaders' new partnerships led to escalating tensions over aspects of the mission's mandate, particularly its perceived "politicization and instrumentalization" of human rights.<sup>156</sup> These tensions were compounded by dynamics within the Security Council, with Russia and China backing the Malian authorities and criticizing the mission's mandate for being overly intrusive and excessively focused on human rights.<sup>157</sup> Tensions deepened when the Malian authorities expelled the mission's human rights director due to his role in selecting a Malian civil society representative to brief the Security Council. Additionally, as the authorities' relationship with ECOWAS worsened, they imposed more impediments on the rotation and deployment of troops to MINUSMA from other West African countries.<sup>158</sup> Ultimately, just over two years after the 2021 coup, the authorities abruptly asked MINUSMA to leave, giving the UN a tight deadline to withdraw one of its most complex and large-scale operations.

While the Taliban have not, to date, asked UNAMA to leave Afghanistan, as in Mali, UNAMA's political engagement with the de facto authorities came to be shaped more by their actions than by how they took power. According to one UN official,

What happened very much has to do with the Taliban more than the fact that it was an unconstitutional change of government.... The bans on women are a big black curtain that the

international community won't see past.... If they'd gone in another direction, it would be easier for these countries to get over the trauma.<sup>159</sup>

The Taliban's ban on girls' education went into effect just over a week after UNAMA received its new mandate in 2022. This ban disabused UN officials of the hope that they might be dealing with a "Taliban 2.0" and undermined the mission's ability to work productively with the de facto authorities.<sup>160</sup> UNAMA's ability to engage the Taliban deteriorated further when, over the course of the following year, the de facto authorities also banned Afghan women's employment in NGOs and, a few months later, in the UN itself.

These bans also exacerbated divisions within the UN presence in Afghanistan (see above). According to one UN official, they created "major divisions and splits and acrimony among all the parties, with everyone taking a very different view."<sup>161</sup> Initially, the UN told all Afghan staff, both men and women, to remain at home as a protest. This policy was strongly supported by UNAMA and a couple other agencies. However, it was opposed by most UN humanitarian personnel, who argued that suspending humanitarian aid would effectively punish women twice and that deliberately depriving people of aid to influence government policy would violate humanitarian principles. Most humanitarian agencies thus quickly abandoned the UN policy. UNAMA, however, stuck to the initial policy and kept all national staff at home for several months until the UN was able to negotiate some flexibility to the ban.<sup>162</sup>

Following the bans, UNAMA was left with only three avenues for political engagement, as described by one UN official: they could explain to the international community why the Taliban was behaving the way they were, they could explain to the Taliban why the international community was

155 Interview #7 with UN official, April 2024.

156 UN Security Council, *Internal Review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2023/36, January 16, 2023.

157 UN Security Council 9082<sup>nd</sup> Meeting, UN Doc. S/PV.9082, June 29, 2023.

158 International Peace Institute, "Emerging Lessons from MINUSMA's Experience in Mali," July 2024.

159 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024.

160 Interview #19 with UN official, July 2024.

161 Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024.

162 For example, women were able to work with other women, and the Taliban agreed to a formal exemption from the ban for healthcare workers. Interview #3 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #11 with UN official, May 2024; IASC, "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to the Crisis in Afghanistan."

reacting the way it was, and they could make the case for donors to deliver more assistance at a time when attention on the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan was waning. With their options so constrained, some political officials in UNAMA argued that they should abandon political engagement altogether and focus on monitoring, though they decided to remain engaged.<sup>163</sup>

The Taliban edicts also again fueled debates over whether UNAMA should withdraw from Afghanistan. Within UNAMA, some felt that the Taliban were not upholding key elements of the UN Charter and the ethical thing to do was to close down the mission and have only a country team headed by an RC/HC. The UN country team was also divided over the future of UNAMA, with some reportedly seeing value in the political cover it provided and others seeing it as “a waste of money,” partly due to frustrations with the approach taken by mission leadership.<sup>164</sup> These divisions led to mixed messaging from different UN officials in the country, with some hinting at a potential “heartbreaking” decision to pull out completely and others committing to “stay the course.”<sup>165</sup>

Ultimately, the uncertainty and divisions surrounding the bans led the UN Security Council to mandate an independent assessment to identify a way forward for international engagement in Afghanistan. Among other things, the assessment recommended the creation of a contact group composed of key member states to coordinate international engagement on Afghanistan and a UN special envoy. It also recommended that UNAMA “continue its work in support of deepening engagement.”<sup>166</sup> Several UNAMA officials noted that the report provided a constructive roadmap to Afghanistan’s reintegration into the international community. However, key recommendations, including the contact group and the special envoy, have not been implemented due to opposition from the Taliban.<sup>167</sup>

Even if the UN is unable to prevent UCGs, it can better prepare for managing relationships with transitional authorities.

Across all three countries, these contentious actions were enabled by the UCGs that brought new authorities to power. However, it is worth noting that authorities in other countries who did not come to power through UCGs have also taken actions that have complicated their engagement with the UN. For example, like the Malian authorities, the Central African government also invited in Wagner Group forces. Nonetheless, authorities who come to power through UCGs may be especially likely to take such actions due to their militarized structures and approaches.

## Lessons for UN Missions Following UCGs

The sharp rise in the number of UCGs since 2020, as well as the growing tendency of the new authorities to entrench themselves in power, can likely be attributed in part to growing geopolitical competition. It is also linked to other recent trends such as the tendency for armed conflicts to be resolved through military victory rather than negotiation and a global erosion in democratic norms. As none of these trends seem on course to reverse in the short term, we are likely to continue seeing UCGs in the years ahead. This will continue to place UN peace operations, as well as UN country teams and other international and regional actors, in a difficult position. Missions will have to continue adapting their approach to engaging with de facto authorities and navigating political transitions. To that end, they could consider the following lessons from the UCGs in Afghanistan, Mali, and Sudan.

- **A principled approach at the highest levels of the UN:** UCGs are almost always an indicator of growing political instability. While the 2019 coup in Sudan and the 2020 coup in Mali brought to power leaders with greater political will to engage with the UN, both coups were followed by a second coup that ultimately led

163 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024.

164 Interview #1 with UN official, March 2024.

165 Kate Clark, “The May 2023 Doha Meeting: How Should the Outside World Deal with the Taliban?” Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 30, 2023.

166 UN Security Council Resolution 2679 (March 16, 2023), UN Doc. S/RES/2679, paras. 100, 103–106.

167 Interview #4 with UN official, March 2024; Interview #11 with UN official, May 2024.

to a breakdown in relations. The UN secretary-general, along with the AU and ECOWAS, already adopts a principled approach to condemning UCGs and should continue doing so. In light of geopolitical divisions in the Security Council, the General Assembly might also play a stronger role in responding to UCGs, as it has in Myanmar.

- **A pragmatic approach for UN peace operations:** At least in the initial period after a UCG, the de facto authorities may be more open to engagement than anticipated due to their desire to avoid international isolation. Among the UN peace operations officials interviewed for this research, there seemed to be consensus that missions should take advantage of this openness to engage the authorities despite fears that doing so might legitimize them. As one UN official stated, “When you have an operation on the ground and there’s a UCG, you cannot make that operation decide on the principles of engagement.... The UN’s first mandate is engagement, and for this, we need to be quite flexible in the way we look at realities.”<sup>168</sup> It is therefore appropriate for DPPA, DPO, and OLA to continue giving missions flexibility in determining how to engage with the new authorities.
- **Planning for UCGs and reviewing political strategies:** Even if the UN is unable to prevent UCGs, it can better prepare for managing relationships with transitional authorities. Particularly in countries like Mali and Sudan that have experienced recurrent coups historically, it is essential to consider such scenarios in mission planning for potential and current operations. Missions may also need to revisit their assumptions about what types of political transitions are realistic following a UCG given the recent shift away from relatively brief political transitions culminating in elections. Toward this end, missions might benefit from strategic assessments conducted as soon as possible following UCGs to consider how to adapt and potentially identify a new direction for engagement.
- **The challenge of remaining impartial:** Fears of “legitimizing” de facto authorities stem from the assumption that those authorities are inherently illegitimate, or at least less legitimate, than the authorities they replaced. Sometimes, as in Afghanistan and Sudan in 2021, the leaders of UCGs are indeed viewed as illegitimate by large portions of the population. In these cases, UN missions have to walk a fine line between engaging with the new authorities and engaging with their opponents. Other times, however, the new authorities may be supported by a significant portion of the population, if not the vast majority, as in Mali. In these cases, UN missions risk damaging their own legitimacy if they are blind to public opinion. Following any UCG, some degree of recognition of the new leaders’ authority, however unofficial, is necessary for UN missions to maintain leverage to engage with them constructively.
- **The need for a “One UN” response:** In integrated mission settings, it is difficult to separate a mission’s political engagement with the new authorities from the engagement of the humanitarian and development parts of the UN system. Separating these different tracks of engagement may also be detrimental. While there is unlikely to be a “one-size-fits-all” approach to engagement with de facto authorities across the entire UN presence in a country, the case of Afghanistan in particular demonstrates the importance of coordinating to ensure UN personnel have a common understanding of core principles of engagement and a coherent approach to communication. This may sometimes call for action from headquarters to create emergency mechanisms to scale up coordination among political, development, human rights, and humanitarian actors following a UCG.
- **The limits of UN engagement:** Ultimately, the ability of UN missions to shape political transitions following UCGs tends to be constrained by factors outside their control. Regional organizations like the AU and ECOWAS tend to adopt a more principled response, raising

168 Interview #9 with UN official, April 2024.

questions about the extent to which UN missions should seek to link their engagement to that of these organizations. Missions also face competing pressures from member states supporting different political factions. These divisions among member states have only grown due to rising geopolitical competition, and the breakdown in cooperation on the Security Council makes it increasingly difficult to change UN missions' mandates even in response to major political upheavals that may render parts of these mandates irrelevant. A

deeply divided Security Council has also weakened political support for UN missions, allowing coup leaders to use this polarization to their own advantage. This division has not only emboldened coup leaders to make operational and political conditions difficult for UN missions but has also resulted in abrupt mission exits without adequate handover processes, and, in the case of MINUSMA, the rushed withdrawal process has compromised the safety of peacekeeping troops.



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