

UN Peace Operations and Unconstitutional Changes of Government



Albert Trithart and Bitania Tadesse | March 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

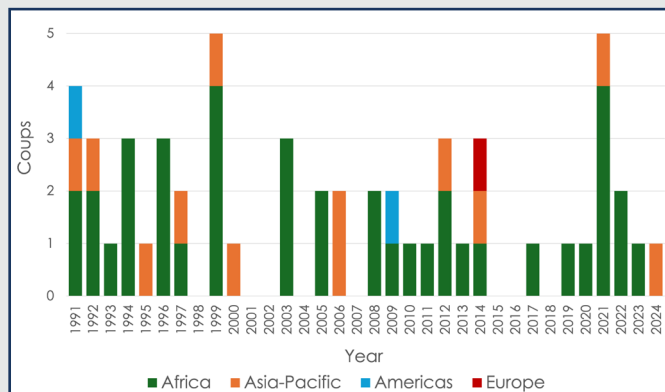
There has been a significant increase in the number of unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) since 2020. This presents a challenge for the United Nations, which has a presence in all countries that have recently experienced UCGs. In places like Afghanistan, Mali, and Sudan, it has also presented 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. In cases like Afghanistan and Sudan, where the new authorities are unpopular or polarizing, there may even be questions around whether the mission should remain in the country. These questions may expose divisions over how to engage with the authorities, particularly between the political side of the mission and development and humanitarian actors.

While all UN missions have remained in place following UCGs and found openings for engaging with the new authorities, they have often struggled to adapt their political strategies, particularly as it became apparent that the new authorities were not interested in short-term transitions to civilian rule followed by elections. They also faced the challenge

of responding to contentious actions by the new authorities that damaged their relationship with the mission. In Mali and Sudan, this eventually led to the authorities asking the mission to leave. While the UN mission in Afghanistan remains present, it has struggled to gain traction for its political engagement while the Taliban remain international pariahs.

UN missions' efforts to use their good offices to engage with de facto authorities have also been impacted by other international, domestic, and regional actors. Growing geopolitical divisions in the Security Council have complicated missions' engagement following UCGs, especially if the council does not change a mission's mandate to reflect the new realities. In Africa, regional organizations working alongside missions, such as the AU and ECOWAS, tend to adopt more principled approaches to UCGs, which can both enhance missions' legitimacy among some constituencies and complicate their engagement with the military authorities.



Because the trends driving the recent increase in UCGs seem likely to continue, 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.

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- **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 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.” 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—and often more detrimental—to separate a mission’s political engagement with the new authorities from the engagement of the humanitarian and development parts of the UN system. 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, UN missions’ ability to shape political transitions following UCGs is constrained by factors outside their control. Regional organizations 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. UCGs may also expose Security Council divisions. This breakdown in cooperation on the Security Council can weaken political support for UN missions and allow 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.