By Andrew Mok

When a little-known logistics officer emerged as leader of Guinea's 2008 coup, some were hopeful that his clique of military officers would finally bring democratic governance to Conakry. Dadis Camara's bloody suppression of opposition protests last September dimmed those hopes, but not the international and domestic calls for immediate transition to civilian government via democratic elections.

This democratic zeitgeist has bred a new intolerance for extra-legal military coups from Madagascar to Mauritania. However, it places an ill-conceived faith in the miraculous power of a quick transition to procedural elections and civilian rule. Such transitions have not prevented further instability and coups in West Africa.

Mauritania's 2005 coup, which overthrew a civilian president elected through dubious polls, brought a democratically elected government, only to be overthrown in a 2008 coup. Guinea-Bissau's former President Joao Vieira returned to power in 2005 post-coup elections, but was then assassinated in 2009 after a long-running conflict with military commanders. Most recently in February this year, Nigerien President Mamadou Tandja, who came to power in elections following a 1999 coup, was deposed.

Guinea-Conakry has the dubious distinction of not even having one democratic election, but a poorly managed transition to civilian government could make it another West African country going through endless crashes and reboots of their democratic operating systems. It's time for the international community to stop demanding pell-mell rushes to formal elections and "normalized" civilian rule.

Incapable leaders and unhappy soldiers

What becomes clear after surveying the various West African coups is that civilian does not equal democratic, and democratic does not mean competent. In fact, it is often the ill-advised behavior of civilian leaders that trigger the coup-phase of the "reboot." After all, Mamadou Tandja's ouster was mainly made possible by his brazenly unconstitutional attempt to keep himself in power even after his term ended in December 2009, as well as his persecution of opposition leaders. Unsurprisingly, there was little complaint from the civilian political opposition in the aftermath of his deposal by the military. Likewise, in 2005, Mauritania's political opposition, harassed and intimidated by then-President Maaouiya Ould Taya, shed few tears at his removal by General Vall.

Even if the civilians were democratically chosen, that doesn't mean they are better at governing. The dysfunctional fragmenting of civilian government also has its precedents in Niger. 1993 saw the fair election of a civilian Nigerien president, but a power struggle between the president and prime minister paralyzed the government, which was cited as the justification

for a military coup in 1996.

The late President Joao Vieira of Guinea-Bissau was deposed by a coup and then returned to power in more-or-less democratic elections in 2005, but was unable to deal with the rising narco-trafficking or prevent army-presidency tensions from turning violent once more. Today, much is made by Western countries about the need to transfer power to Guinea's civilian politicians, but does this necessarily lead to a more stable and functional government? To be fair, the governing ability of Guinea's long-time opposition leaders remains to be judged. Yet, conflicts over the allocation of posts in the caretaker government in January reveal already latent tensions between interim Prime Minister Jean Mari Doré and union leader Rabiatou Diallo, two key figures whose cooperation is critical for a successful transition. Poor, and even undemocratic, civilian leadership is a fundamental cause of political instability that paves the way for West African coups in the first place.

The second common theme is that unhappy soldiers make willing conspirators. Sounds obvious, yes, but this principle seems consistently ignored by civilian presidents who often find themselves shunted out of office by disgruntled military commanders. Mauritania's 2008 coup featured an open struggle between then-President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and top generals he was trying to fire. In Niger, regular military officers became unhappy with Tandja's regime after he signed a peace deal with the Touareg rebels in the North. He also, rather foolishly, attempted to lay off members of his own presidential guard, who were then co-opted by coup leaders. When Tandja first heard firing outside his presidential palace, he was so uninformed that he reportedly called for help from the very armoured car unit that formed the coup plotters' force.

Guinea-Bissau's late President Vieira made this mistake twice and lost his life the second time. The first time was in May 1998, when he fired military chief of staff Ansumane Mané for arming Senegalese insurgents across the border. This accusation was quite disingenuous because a parliamentary report about to be published found that it was actually Vieira who was supporting the Casamance rebels. Mane launched a revolt and civil war, which went badly for Vieira and resulted in exile. Of course, the measures he took during the 1990s to curb the influence of the ruling party's anti-colonial war veterans did nothing to endear him to the military. After his 2005 political comeback, Vieira's relations with military leaders deteriorated once more, and when chief of staff General Tagame Na Wai was assassinated last year, military officers immediately suspected Vieira, who was killed in retaliation.

So can they work as advertised?

Forgetting for a moment the lacklustre performance of civilian politicians and the difficulties of keeping the military happy, can West African military coups actually work out in the way the generals, colonels, and now captains, claim?

As a vehicle for restoring democratic rule, West African military coups have had a mixed record. The September bloodshed in Guinea is a recent example of failure, and so was the 1999 Christmas Coup in Cote d'Ivoire. There's definitely a risk that military leaders will renege or put off holding elections and transitioning to civilian rule.

Yet, other West African coup leaders have fulfilled pledges to hold democratic elections and step down. The April 1999 coup in Niger led by General Daouda Wanke against another military government led to a referendum on a new constitution and reasonably fair elections the same year, which, ironically, brought Mamadou Tandja to the presidency. General Vall's 2005 coup in Mauritania also led to new parliamentary and presidential elections after which military leaders handed over power. However, these "democratic coups" ultimately failed to prevent another round of instability, coups, and elections.

A more celebrated instance of a military coup "gone right" took place in neighbouring Mali in 1991, when longtime dictator Moussa Traoré triggered his downfall by violently suppressing demonstrations against his rule. A coup by Colonel Amadou Touré initiated a successful transition to civilian rule and free elections. A decade after the coup, a civilian Touré was elected President of Mali, showing that coup leaders who step down can have a future in civilian politics.

Indeed, the Malian case was and is cited as the model for Guinea, with observers now hoping that the current military leadership under Sekouba Konaté, unlike Camara, will follow Touré's example of handing over power to civilian leaders. Notably, Mali's one-off "reboot" was successful, and has not trapped it in an endless cycle of coups and post-coup elections. So if the goal is to establish a sustainable democracy, coups can work as advertised, but more often they do not.

Ending the endless reboots

The dubious track record of civilian leaders in West African states that have experienced coups should make us wary of the supposed miraculous effects of restoring procedural democracy and civilian rule. Niger and Guinea-Bissau both saw civilian leaders put in power through more or less fair elections in the 1990s, and the results for governance were not entirely inspiring. Niger, after all, elected a president who last year decided that he should no longer be bound by constitutional term limits.

The obsession of international actors with the restoration of democracy's procedural trappings and civilian leadership within compressed timeframes create unrealistic expectations of what democracy can achieve. These hopes are dashed once it becomes obvious that the challenges confronting West African countries were not solved with changes in leadership. Dissatisfied, elements of society, including the army, turn once more to other options, creating a cycle of military coups, civilian restoration, and disillusionment. Democracy alone will not solve West Africa's problems, and Western countries need to stop treating it as a panacea.

Even if Western countries conclude, as do public opinion polls in West Africa, that democratic rule is the most acceptable and desirable option, let's not be so dogmatic about hastily restoring civilian rule and procedural democracy. There's so much more to democratic governance than going through the motions of voting. Pushing elections through regardless is foolish, as are the immediate calls for a timetable, usually expected within months, for "democratic" elections and hasty transitions.

If donors want to support the development of genuine democracy, it is not enough to rush through internationally monitored elections. If promoting democratic governance is more than about assuaging Western public opinion with image of voting queues and ballot-counting, donor countries and local politicians must take the time to build the other essential elements of democratic rule, like respect for individual rights and a free press.

Taking the time to get the transition right does not mean wandering aimlessly without objectives. The point is that the end-all, be-all goal must not be democratic elections at any cost, but rather the emergence of a national consensus about the political way forward. Foreign governments and regional/international organizations at this crucial juncture must support the making of a grand bargain between the various political players in the transition country. And yes, political players would have to include military leaders who, after all, are the ones being asked to give up their one playable card.

Certainly, sometimes, as with Guinea, the military strongmen may not be the most desirable partners. But barring the type of massive nation-building project (for which the West has no compelling interest in West Africa) needed to change the groups sitting at the political table, we will have to work with whom we've got. After numerous false starts, the prescriptive program of hasty post-coup elections needs to be rewritten.

Taking the time to strike the political grand bargain may be just what these West African nations need to end the endless democracy reboots.