

ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC,
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AT THE REFLECTION FORUM II ON UNCONSTITUTIONAL
CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT, ORGANISED BY THE AU
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS, PEACE AND SECURITY,
AND PEACE AND SECURITY COUNCIL, ON MONDAY, 18TH
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Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, before I start my presentation, let us remember that no effort for peace will succeed or endure without the meaningful contribution and inclusion of women and girls. As we are still in month of March, within which we celebrated International Women's Day, may I please ask all of us to raise our hands in applause to recognise the contribution of our women in the search for peace and stability on this continent.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, in March 2022, Ghana made her facilities available for the hosting of the Accra Forum, which led to the adoption of a landmark declaration outlining Africa's collective vision and plans for addressing the scourge of unconstitutional changes of governments. The diversity and rich inputs generated by all of us on the subject, ultimately, culminated in the Accra Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Governments, which crystallised our collective position and orientation in the management of the challenge.

The Accra Declaration expresses effectively our commitment to address comprehensively the underlying drivers of unconstitutional changes of governments, particularly the aspects of governance deficits, and the manipulation of democratic processes, including tampering with electoral laws, constitutional provisions, and term limits with the goal of benefiting at the expense of democratic norms and principles. It appeals to Member States to respect their respective Constitutions, especially adherence to presidential term limits, and to organise free, fair, transparent and credible elections in line with national laws and international norms, as well as respecting the outcomes of elections.

Accordingly, on 28th May 2022, the Assembly of the African Union held its 16th Extraordinary Summit in Malabo, which endorsed the Accra Declaration, and made provisions to enhance the effectiveness of our collective response to the spread of coups. The Accra Declaration and the

Malabo Summit decisions affirmed our collective commitment to the principle of zero tolerance for coup d'états.

It is a pity that a Member State seems bent on undermining the Accra Declaration, and our collective stance on term extensions and unconstitutional changes of government. Nonetheless, I am happy that Africa's position on this matter, in letter and spirit, is an unequivocal condemnation of any form of ascent to power that is outside constitutional provisions and inimical to democratic norms.

As I indicated on Tuesday, 15th March 2022, when we gathered in this same hall, I presented some statistics on the state of governance in Africa. To measure the progress made or otherwise, Excellencies, permit me to begin by revisiting the state of governance in Africa, to serve as the basis for comparison with what the situation was in 2022.

When we gathered here two years ago, four Member States of our Union had been suspended due to the occurrence of unconstitutional changes of governments in their territories. The situation was so dire that our meeting, here in Accra, was necessary. Today, two years later, the situation has worsened. As we gather here, six Member States of the Union have been suspended for the same reasons. This is an extraordinary occurrence in our efforts to safeguard the ideals of democracy in Africa. What is more is that the territories within which the two coups in 2023 occurred have created a geographical spread, which many refer to as a "coup belt," stretching from the Atlantic coast, here in West Africa, through the Sahel to the Red Sea coast in the Horn of Africa.

The questions to ask, as we have convened again are: what do these further developments tell us about the implementation of the outcomes of our inaugural 2022 forum and, indeed, the Malabo Summit in May of the same year?

From all indications, there has been a deterioration, and we must answer why, even in the best of instances, only incremental progress is being made. I believe that, in this situation, like everything else, identifying why things have not worked is a major step in knowing how to make things work going forward.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I do not intend to spend our limited time here rehashing the same things. However, I want us to reflect critically on a few things.

Firstly, why does it appear that a good percentage of the population of countries affected by coups in recent times celebrated the occurrence of the phenomenon? Is it a case that African citizens are welcoming to some coups or a celebration of change?

Secondly, are we seeing a rise in coups d'états because of the failure of early warning or ineffective responses?

Thirdly, given that these coups d'états are taking place in sovereign states, what are the realistic and practical preventive and response measures that our multilateral institutions should consider, given the obvious limitations emerging around existing practices and norms?

The answer to the first question, ladies and gentlemen, is clear. The celebrations are more about change than support for coups. Various research institutions, including the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre and the Institute for Security Studies, have shed light on this. When elections are not truly free and fair, and legal tactics are employed to undermine the spirit of democracy, when legal loopholes are exploited to subvert constitutional provisions that guarantee inclusion and participation, and when state apparatus is used to muzzle freedom of expression, citizens begin to feel that democratic processes have taken them hostage and often celebrate anything that looks like an end to their present predicament. The answer is simple: our people simply want to enjoy the dividends of democracy.

Second, there is plenty of early warning information. Every country has intelligence services, and these agencies report on the threat and risk profiles of our countries, regions and continent. We have early warning architectures at the regional and continental levels. These are complemented by the Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa (CISSA). So why are we still failing to arrest the situation of UCGs on our Continent? Is there a disconnect in the flow of information between these structures and decision-making, or are we allowing the politics of decision-making and the pursuit of national interests to stand in the way of action?

Excellencies, in this regard, what can we do differently? I think that we need our secretariats, elected officials, international civil servants, think tanks, and civil society actors to provide policymakers with innovative and practical recommendations. Given the complexities associated with addressing the challenges we are confronted with, one cannot be prescriptive. However, the one thing that is critical, and for which we need our multilateral institutions to make significant investments, is relationship building. There must be a critical group of individuals within and outside the multilateral frameworks that our AU officials should be able to call upon to engage and co-generate response options, when necessary, to de-escalate crises.

Permit me to commend the AU Commission for the comprehensive report on peace and security it presented to the Assembly in February. But I challenge you to go further than the diplomatically couched recommendations to provide the Assembly with critical points on what they must do. There is a reason why the ensuing discussions on the report are held in-camera. Our secretariats cannot tell us what they think we want to hear. That approach has not changed anything to date. We need to explore new territories. They must discharge their mandates to tell us what we need to know by speaking truth to power.

It is important to note that multilateral institutions are only as strong as how Member States make them, and, when sovereignty becomes a shield rather than the enabling framework for protecting citizens and the constitution, it is problematic. Experience has taught us that, even though, external support is essential for accountability, it is ultimately national institutions, structures and processes that can effectively elicit compliance for our collective norms and frameworks on governance, democracy, and governance. The AU and our regional bodies must invest in developing our national institutions, and empowering citizens with the requisite knowledge to demand compliance and accountability from their governments. In saying this, I am also aware of the grave dangers some of those, who have dared to engage at the national level, face. In those instances, where the defenders of governance and constitutionalism face repression, we must raise our voices in their defence as a collective. We cannot abandon the messengers we send when they are confronted with danger because of the messages they deliver.

Finally, as we reflect on the state of unconstitutional changes of governments, I would like to draw attention to two burning issues that

require urgent attention: one is the ongoing war in Sudan, a consequence of 25th October 2021, that led to the resignation of the transitional Prime Minister Hamdook. There is no way we can talk of a return to constitutionalism without ending the violence that is ravaging the people of the country. I, thus, urge the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace, and Security and his team to redouble efforts to find a suitable solution to the violence in Sudan.

The second issue is the imminent threat to West Africa's long-standing integration experience.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, the interlinked nature of our security, in all its dimensions, means that we need all hands-on-deck. How can we afford disunity in the face of a common threat? Again, I charge the AU Department of Political Affairs, Peace, and Security to work closely with ECOWAS to identify ways to prevent the withdrawal of the states that have signalled their intention to leave.

Before I conclude, it is my hope that this Forum will provide pragmatic solutions to the challenges of unconstitutional changes of governments. It is my conviction that this gathering is best placed to help proffer solutions to the many questions we currently face in the subject area.

I want to assure you of the full support of the Government and people of Ghana for your productive deliberations over the next two days. Accordingly, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it is my honour and pleasure to declare this Forum officially open.

May God bless us all, and our homeland Ghana, and make her great and strong.

I thank you for your attention.