

African and Arab Military Elites as Change Agents: Ruse or Reality?

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The post-colonial era of African and Arab politics was dominated by military elites who grounded their coups on a battery of rationales such as eliminating corruption and civilian incompetence. Military elites promised to use superior military discipline for rapid economic development and moral probity. African and Arab military elites presented themselves as change agents who were motivated by patriotism and would put an end to feeble, immoral and bumbling civilian governments. This paper seeks to interrogate military rule in Africa and in the Arab world through the perspective of the soldier as a social change agent. Drawing on decades of empirical research on the armed forces of Africa and the Arab world, the paper examines how military elites positioned themselves as change agents, the changes which military rule has created, the institutional mechanisms utilized by soldiers to effect societal changes and the ramifications of those changes on the societies governed by military elites. The paper compares and contrasts the changes advocated and implemented by African and Arab military elites. It concludes that although military rule in Africa and the Middle-East brought monumental changes, military elites largely failed in their self-assigned task of using coups for fundamental revolutionary, redemptive or liberating changes. While the military elites' self-image as change agents might not have been illusory, soldiers' capacity to effect desired positive changes in the political economy of Africa and the Middle-East was highly limited. Ironically, the military elites' exaggerated imagery as change agents blinded them to the reality that the changes they wrought through coups accentuated the very problems that they sought to solve.