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HEADLINE: Political Turbulence Sweeps West Africa

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Early on a steamy Sunday in June, dissident soldiers in civilian clothes slipped into Accra, the capital of Ghana, and undertook to seize control of the impoverished West African country from Jerry J. Rawlings.

Like three other attempted coups since Rawlings, an air force lieutenant, seized power Dec. 31, 1981, the challenge was put down, this time in a matter of hours.

Thus ended the latest episode in a surge of political turbulence in West Africa, where countries are now well into the third decade of independence from European colonial powers.

"If you use 25 years as a generation, you would think that a generation would be enough time to bring a lot of this (tumult) to an end," said one Western analyst asking to remain anonymous because of his diplomatic status. "But maybe it can't be done in a generation."

Withered economies and unresolved political disputes have made for a volatile combination that has shaken West African states and contributed to the emergence of disquieting social problems even in the Ivory Coast, the region's traditional bulwark of stability:

Chad, a former French colony, has been devastated by 18 years of intermittent civil war.

The incumbent regime of President Hissene Habre, whose forces took the battle-scarred capital of N'Djamena slightly more than a year ago, is seriously threatened by insurgents armed and supported by Col. Moammar Khadafy's Libya.

The military leaders who seized power in Upper Volta, one of the world's poorest countries, this spring announced a sweeping, pre-dawn purge of officials sympathetic to Khadafy.

The prime minister was twice placed under house arrest and a brief rebellion by dissident troops in the south of the country was snuffed out.

The vigorous but fragile democracy in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, confronts a crucial test in August with general elections, the first conducted by civilians since 13 years of military government ended in 1979.

In the weeks before the voting, suspicion of election fraud was rampant in Nigeria, where six political parties are running candidates for the presidency.

"The fear of election rigging has become so pervasive it is threatening common sense," the New Nigerian newspaper commented in May.

Another newspaper, the Sunday Tribune, has said: "The consequences of rigged elections in Nigeria in 1983 will be grand confusion and chaos ... that may send Nigeria permanently to the debris of history."

Not all observers share such an appraisal, but few deny the divisive potential of widespread vote fraud and election-related violence in Nigeria.

While not abundant, there are nonetheless examples of peaceful transfers of power in West Africa:

Senegal, one of three countries in the region that allows multiparty politics, consolidated such a transfer early this year with the re-election of President Abdou Diouf.

Diouf, a tall, austere politician, assumed office in late 1980 after the retirement of Leopold Senghor, one of Africa's most distinguished and erudite leaders.

In Liberia, Samuel K. Doe, a 31-year-old former master sergeant who came to power three years ago in one of Africa's bloodiest, most vicious coups, has pledged that the country established by freed American slaves will be returned to civilian control in April 1985, after general elections.

The recent convulsions in West Africa are most commonly attributed to battered, debt-ridden national economies, and Ghana is perhaps the most compelling case in point.

Ghana qualified as West Africa's most flourishing country in the years immediately after independence from Britain in 1957.

However, spending on grandiose development projects crippled the country and Ghana's first leader, Kwame Nkrumah, who referred to himself as the redeemer, was overthrown in 1966.

Nine civilian and military governments have followed, while the cocoa-based economy deteriorated.

Ghana has been beset further this year by devastating, dry-season brush fires, acute food shortages and the sudden return of a million nationals expelled from Nigeria in January as illegal immigrants.

Rawlings, the head of state, has a tenuous hold on power. His austerity budget—which states that Ghana has reached a "make or break point where (it) must apply the most effective and necessarily drastic cure or suffer unavoidable disaster"—has alienated much of the country's beleaguered middle class.

Declining revenues for coffee and cocoa, the Ivory Coast's principal export products,

prompted a variety of austerity measures, including sharp reductions in generous housing subsidies for school teachers. In the spring, 4,000 secondary-school teachers went on strike, an uncommon act of defiance of authority in the country.

Economic travail is by no means the exclusive explanation given for West African turbulence.

Some of the region's moderate leaders openly charge that Libya is inspiring rebellion and political intrigue throughout the continent.