



Of Strong Men and Straw Men

Appraising Post-Coup Political
Developments

Jonathan Powell, PhD

Recent years have seen a rise in scholarly attention afforded to coups d'état. Though perhaps strange at first glance, given coups have become increasingly rare in the world, the reasons for this renewed focus on coups readily become apparent. First, a number of high-quality publicly available datasets have been released, allowing interested researchers to study not just coups but also their connection to a range of other issues such as civil war, repression, economic growth, and democratization. Second, the utilization of these data sources has led to what might at first appearance be seen as odd claims, such as a purported association between the occurrences of coups and subsequent democratic transitions. Traditionally seen as inherently antidemocratic, recent studies by authors such as Clayton Thyne, Jonathan Powell, Nikolay Marinov, and Hein Goemans suggesting otherwise have solicited swift reactions.¹

Retired ambassadors Linda Thomas-Greenfield and D. Bruce Wharton weigh in on this debate with their article on the aftermath of Zimbabwe's 2017 coup titled "Zimbabwe's Coup: Net Gain or No Gain?," recently published in *Military Review*.² Their article discusses the lack of democratic process seen under Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa's regime, and they tackle a range of issues including a debate about what might be referred to as "good coups" or "democratic coups." Though sharing the primary sympathies of the authors, their discussion of the relevant academic literature and specific cases is at times in need of clarification.

The aim of this article is to give a fuller appraisal of these dynamics. A review of the literature and data indicate that Thomas-Greenfield and Wharton overstate the prospects for democratization claimed in prior literature, understate how frequently democratization occurs following coups, and treat a number of non-coup cases as if they represent coups. Though fully agreeing with the need to view coups skeptically, a more comprehensive appraisal of the historical record

is essential to eventually understand how to influence more positive post-coup political trajectories.

Revisiting Scholarship

A range of recent assessments in both academic and popular outlets have attempted to assess the likelihood of democratization after military coups. Thomas-Greenfield and Wharton incorporate two of these: (1) Ozan Varol's book *The Democratic Coup d'État* and (2) Thyne and Powell's article "Coups d'état or Coup d'Autocracy: How Coups Impact Democratization, 1950-2008."³ While the former relies on numerous anecdotes whose generalizability may be uncertain, the latter attempts to investigate broad empirical trends using publicly available global data. Given the replicability of the Thyne and Powell study, this article will focus on the latter.

Though the theme of Thyne and Powell's article is prominently featured in Thomas-Greenfield's and Wharton's, their coverage of the article is ultimately limited to a single quote from the abstract. Specifically, the abstract notes that "coups promote democratization, particularly among states that are least likely to democratize otherwise."⁴ The authors provide no other context for this quote, including a discussion as to how the authors reached this conclusion. Devoid of context, the description of the article and its more general findings are misleading.

First, the quote is specifically in reference to what would be expected to happen in the absence of a coup. In other words, without being removed via a coup, dictators are very, very unlikely to democratize. If the dictator is overthrown in a coup, democratization is still very unlikely, but the probability is significantly higher than if a coup did not occur. This does not mean that democracy would ever be an expected outcome. In contrast to the image of being naively supportive of coups, Thyne and Powell take multiple steps to temper optimism. Most directly relevant to Zimbabwe, they briefly comment on economist Paul Collier's *Washington Post* opinion piece, "Let Us Now Praise Coups."⁵ Collier observes the dire consequences of autocratic misrule, specifically former President Robert Mugabe's leadership in Zimbabwe, and argues that coups are "unguided missiles," but "there is still something to be said for them" and that they are the "best hope of suffering citizens." In contrast, Thyne and Powell directly challenge

Previous page: Chadian rebel Idriss Déby, leader of the Chadian Patriotic Salvation Movement, holds a press conference 2 December 1990 after his arrival in N'Djamena, Chad. The insurgent group marched into the capital, and Déby's troops overthrew the Hissène Habré regime. (Photo by Pierre Briand, Agence France-Presse)



Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi votes 25 March 2007 at a polling center in Nouakchott, Mauritania, in the first presidential election following a 2005 military coup that overthrew former military dictator Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya. Abdallahi was elected president but was overthrown in 2008 by another military coup, having run afoul of the military by introducing measures that were perceived as promoting Islamist policies. (Photo by Georges Gobet, Agence France-Presse)

and go against Collier's suggestion that we should "praise coups." Instead, they point to coups as the cause of "a plethora of societal ills" and further draw attention to "cases where coup leaders chose to personalize the regime" and to history being "unfortunately replete with examples of coup leaders who chose to consolidate

their power." They also note that coups "are bad for democratic stability" and should not "be fomented or celebrated," as doing so would be "reckless."⁶

Second, Thyne and Powell provide quite explicit descriptions of how unlikely democratization is. The article's two tables, which reported their results and analyses, suggest that the probability of democratization goes from .005 in the absence of a recent coup to .010 in the presence of a recent coup. This is hardly suggestive of the widespread "democratizing impulse" among coup leaders inferred by Thomas-Greenfield and Wharton, and prior academic literature does little to suggest there should be one. Even if the probabilities reported by Thyne and Powell were far higher, the idea of a democratizing impulse would not be supported. As Thyne and Powell identify with the "good" case of Portugal's 1974 coup,

which is briefly described below, democratization was not even a goal of the plotters.

Third, Thomas-Greenfield and Wharton drastically understate how common democratization is after coups. They suggest "Portugal's 1974 coup, Turkey's coup in 1960, and, perhaps, Ghana's coup in 1979 each

Table 1. Post-Coup Political Trajectories

Coups data set	Polity IV	The Rulers, Elections, and Irregular Governance DataSet (REIGN)	Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (CGV)	Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (GWF)
Powell and Thyne	21/144 15% (6%)	25/167 15% (7%)	27/147 18% (7%)	21/140 15% (6%)
Goemans et al.	21/172 12% (5%)	21/146 14% (8%)	24/133 18% (8%)	18/129 14% (7%)
Center for Systemic Peace	18/145 12% (6%)	18/152 12% (7%)	22/146 15% (7%)	17/136 13% (7%)
Cline Center for Democracy	20/136 15% (6%)	23/147 16% (7%)	25/140 18% (7%)	24/138 17% (6%)

(Table by author)

Table 2. Post-Coup Political Trajectories in the Post-Cold War Period

	Polity IV	The Rulers, Elections, and Irregular Governance DataSet (REIGN)	Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (CGV)	Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (GWF)
Powell and Thyne	6/20 30% (10%)	11/28 39% (10%)	4/19 21% (8%)	8/17 47% (11%)
Goemans et al.	7/17 41% (10%)	13/25 52% (12%)	4/16 25% (9%)	9/17 53% (12%)
Center for Systemic Peace	4/17 24% (10%)	7/22 32% (11%)	2/16 13% (9%)	5/13 38% (12%)
Cline Center for Democracy	4/15 27% (11%)	8/20 40% (11%)	4/18 22% (9%)	8/18 44% (12%)

(Table by author)

seem to have led to stronger democracies,” but “three positive examples out of more than 450 coups or attempted coups is poor evidence of the efficacy of coups in advancing democratic governance.”⁷⁷ Though perhaps rare, recent decades have seen scores of democratic transitions, and according to a range of independent data efforts on classifying either coups or regime type, there are in fact dozens of cases of transitions in the aftermath of coups. This point will be revisited below.

Fourth, it is important to clarify how different leaders have entered office, as different methods of regime change are often conflated. Thomas-Greenfield and Wharton, for example, lament a lack of democratic progress after presumed coups when a coup was not actually responsible for the leader coming to power. In Djibouti, for example, President Ismail Omar Guelleh entered office not through a coup but after the resignation

of Djibouti's first president, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, his uncle. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, meanwhile, came to power via the Ugandan Bush War. Denis Sassou-Nguesso, president of the Republic of the Congo, similarly came to power via the Republic of the Congo's civil war (with no small role played by Angolan troops). The same can be

distinction, as some cases of democratization see the experiment quickly fail.

For example, Mauritania transitioned to a democracy soon after the 2005 coup that removed long-tenured military dictator Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya.⁹ However, the transition soon failed, with the freely elected president Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi being removed



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said for Chadian President Idriss Déby, who though accused of an occasional coup plot during his time in the Chadian armed forces, ultimately overthrew President Hissène Habré via an insurgency (with no small assistance from Libya).

This is not merely a semantic distinction. Coups and civil wars are different types of actions that leave different types of legacies, particularly when it comes to challenges for democratization. Given the far higher costs of removing leaders through civil war, including years of substantial financial and infrastructural devastation, loss of human life, and pronounced displacement of people, it is not surprising that countries virtually never democratize after leaders are removed through civil wars. If Thomas-Greenfield and Wharton do not see a democratizing impulse in leaders like Museveni, Sassou-Nguesso, and Déby, a logical explanation is that there is nothing in historical record or academic literature that suggests they should.

How Common Is Democratization?

To put this discussion in perspective, data drawn from a number of publicly available sources are depicted in table 1 (on page 50).⁸ The rows include four different efforts to classify coups, and the columns include four different efforts to classify democracy. This provides sixteen combinations of independently collected data, ensuring that any apparent trend is not driven by the selection of any data source in particular. The data looks at where there was (or was not) a coup in a given year, then considers whether the country was a democracy three years later. This is an important

in a subsequent coup after less than two years in power.¹⁰ Since Mauritania did not remain a democracy through the third year, it would not be captured as a transition. Three years allows ample time to organize an election in most cases, but some post-coup transitions take longer. The coup against Paraguay's President Alfredo Stroessner, for example, was clearly a major event for the country's democratic transition. However, since the transition was not captured as complete within three years, it would not qualify as a transition in the data. In short, the data presented in the tables is a modest assessment of how common post-coup transitions are.

Table 1 provides the full time frame after 1950. The first set of numbers reflects the number of transitions observed and the number of coups in each of the sixteen samples. The first percentage refers to the rate at which coup cases were democracies three years later. The percentage reported in parentheses refers to the democratization rate seen when there was not a coup in the sample. So for a sample of cases that use the Powell and Thyne coup dataset and the Polity IV regime data, a project from the Center for Systemic Peace that evaluates a range of democratic and authoritarian traits across polities globally, 144 coups saw twenty-one transitions (a

Jonathan Powell, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Central Florida. He received his PhD from the University of Kentucky and regularly publishes work on civil-military relations, especially on dynamics associated with the causes and consequences of military coups.

15 percent rate), while autocracies democratized at a rate of 6 percent in the absence of a coup.

Looking across the various datasets, two trends are apparent. First, there are far more than three cases of transitions. Second, since 1950 coups have seen democracy follow around 15 percent of the time (+/- 3 percent). Third, this rate is invariably higher than the rate seen in the absence of coups, usually over two times higher.

Even a skeptical take on Thyne and Powell's paper authored by George Derpanopoulos, Erica Frantz, Barbara Geddes, and Joseph Wright, titled "Are Coups Good for Democracy?" acknowledged that 40 percent of coups against dictatorships in the post-Cold War era result in democratic transitions.¹¹ Though still a minority outcome, this is an extraordinary rate, especially considering the otherwise dire circumstances that coups often accompany, circumstances not usually conducive to democratic transitions. Table 2 (on page 50) repeats the process for coups that have occurred since 1990. The post-Cold War period has seen far higher democratization rates in a general sense but has seen rates become particularly high after coups. The comparative rareness of coups over recent decades limits the ability to draw substantial inferences from this; however, the likelihood of democratization appears to be three to four times higher when coups occur.

Accurately Informing Debate and Policy

Coups should always be viewed with skepticism, even when toppling dictators and despite whatever flowery things coup leaders say in order to avoid the ire of domestic or international actors. A bizarre trend after the removal of Mugabe was observers taking Maj. Gen. Sibusiso Moyo's word when he appeared on television to announce the Zimbabwean coup. Moyo claimed "this is not a military takeover of government" but rather a way "to pacify a degenerating political, social, and economic situation."¹² His words were quite typical of a coup, including those that would see the rise of notorious dictators, such as former Ugandan President Idi Amin's statement: "Mine will be purely a caretaker administration, pending an early return to civilian rule."¹³ However, a healthy suspicion of coup plotters should be accompanied by an objective understanding of their legacies. Not taking an objective look at the data distracts from and prevents answering the far more important question of

how policy can be informed to help the people of countries suffering through coups avoid succumbing to the many ills that have afflicted countless post-coup polities.

As shown above, the reality is that democratic transitions are an outcome that is probably far more common than most people expect. However, we simply do not know *why* this is the case, and the academic literature specifically questions the roles of coups themselves. The theory of Thyne and Powell, for example, points to coups as "windows of opportunity," but it is the need for post-coup legitimation and the reactions of the international community that would prompt a transition. In other words, the transition is less about the coup and more about how different actors influence the subsequent political trajectory. In their aforementioned study, Nikolay Marinov and Hein Goemans make a similar argument regarding foreign aid by arguing that the increased conditionality seen in the post-Cold War world incentivizes coup leaders to allow elections. In Thyne and Powell's subsequent paper with Sarah Parrott and Emily VanMeter, titled "Even Generals Need Friends: How Domestic International Reactions to Coups Influence Regime Survival," they find that hostile reactions from both domestic and international actors can force post-coup governments to step down more quickly.¹⁴

Other studies have pointed to important domestic challenges for transitions, including obstacles posed by military interest, public demand for democracy, wealth and other aspects of economic development and interdependence, and the legacies of single-party rule.¹⁵ What all of these studies suggest is that Zimbabwe's pre-coup conditions would have made it a very difficult case for democratization from the outset. This challenge was made even more difficult after so many actors in the international community effectively pretended a coup had not occurred.¹⁶ Instead of treating Mugabe's removal as an opportunity to leverage meaningful political change, the post-coup regime was treated with a business-as-usual mentality. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that post-coup politics in the country have in fact been business-as-usual.

Closing Remarks

Democracy is not an accident. Though democratic transitions can sometimes come about unintentionally or after what might be referred to as "dumb luck," there are a number of important dynamics that ultimately

shape post-coup trajectories. Nor is democracy a given outcome following the removal of a dictator. Though oppressed peoples and members of the international community may sometimes celebrate an autocrat's ousting, the reality is that the event merely represents an opportunity. Seizing that opportunity and realizing the

empowerment of the masses in a stable electoral regime, however, requires overcoming a range of legacies, the commitment of innumerable actors, and policy informed by a careful evaluation of prior events and efforts to promote democratization. Providing an accurate appraisal of that record, then, is crucial. ■

Notes

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