

WHY DEMOCRATIZATION DOES NOT SOLVE THE COUP PROBLEM

a One Earth Future Foundation **POLICY BRIEF**



Since the end of the Cold War, the military coup d'état has become the greatest threat to transitional democracies around the world. A new global study carries policy implications for how and why coups are undermining transitional democracies, and how new democracies can keep military elites out of politics while avoiding repression.

Policy Implications:

- Military elites are powerful figures in nondemocratic governments, so they may want to retain that influence during transitions to democracy. So as to reduce coup risk, transitional governments should actively work to include them in political transitions.
- Constraints on executive authority (i.e., checks and balances) prevent the leaders of transitional democracies from “coup-proofing” as effectively as the comparatively unconstrained leaders of nondemocratic states, so international actors must work harder to preemptively condemn and prevent coups against new democracies.
- Organizations working in transitional democracies should be aware that while democratization does not increase the frequency of coup attempts, it does roughly double the chances that an attempted coup will be successful. Organizations should have contingency plans for attempted and successful coups in newly democratic states.

WHY DEMOCRATIZATION DOES NOT SOLVE THE COUP PROBLEM

Since the end of the Cold War, the military coup d'état has become the greatest threat to transitional democracies around the world. In support of the One Earth Future Foundation's work to promote good governance, Dr. Curtis Bell completed a global study of how and why coups are undermining transitional democracies.

The study, published in *Comparative Political Studies* under the title "Coup d'État and Democracy," calls attention to this problem and urges greater focus on how new democracies can, with the help of the international community, convince military elites to stay out of politics without relying on repression.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

In the first decade after the Cold War, the global frequency of coups d'état fell by nearly 50 percent. This sharp decline inspired hope for a more democratic future with fewer military governments. But following this initial decline, the drop in coup activity stalled, as did the progress of global democratization. The share of the world's countries classified as "free" by the think tank Freedom House has been near 45 percent since the turn of the century and there have been more successful coups over the last decade (seventeen from 2005 to 2014) than there were in the decade before that (fifteen from 1995 to 2004). Troublingly, the majority of the leaders removed by coups over the last decade governed democracies.



General Al Sisi; photo by Erin A Kirk Cuomo on Flickr

What makes transitional democracies prone to coup attempts, and why are coups against democracies more likely to succeed? What can new democracies do to reduce the risk of coup attempts, and how might international actors participate in coup prevention? Answering these questions is important for resolving the coup problem and getting democratization back on track.

Coups threaten democracies because the same laws that constrain their leaders with checks and balances also inhibit swift coup-proofing. Nondemocratic leaders can repress with impunity, reassign potential rivals to less threatening positions, and otherwise disrupt the organizational capacities of political opponents. The leaders of democracies are less able to take these measures due to more extensive constraints on executive authority. In this way, the constraints that democratic constitutions impose on leaders have both stabilizing and destabilizing effects. Motivations for coups are lower because regime opponents have less reason to fear repression, but coups are made more enticing by the fact that democratic leaders are relatively unable to aggressively and proactively defend against them. For this reason, transitions to democracy have the following effects on coup activity:

- 1 Democracies use less coup-related repression, including government allegations of foiled coups and arrests of political rivals and military elites. All else being equal democratic governments are less than 50 percent as likely as nondemocratic governments to use these coup-proofing tactics.

Amnesty UK and Rohingya during Burmese Election; photo by See Li on Flickr



- 2 Because constraints on democratically elected leaders make repression less likely, motivations for coups decrease (less fear of repression), but opportunities for coups increase (greater chances of success). These effects cancel each other so that democracies do not suffer significantly more or fewer coup attempts relative to nondemocracies.
- 3 As democratic constraints inhibit coup-proofing, any attempts against democracies are more likely to succeed than attempts against nondemocracies. In other words, coup success rates are exceptionally high when coup plotters target democratic governments.



Protesting reincorporation to the Organization of American States (OAS) after a coup in Honduras; photo by Laura on Flickr

These predictions are supported with a global statistical analysis of coup activity from 1945 to 2011. The analysis finds democracies to be approximately 50 percent less likely to accuse elites of coup plotting, but no less likely to suffer coup attempts. Though democracies and nondemocracies suffer coup attempts with similar frequencies, coups against democracies are more than twice as likely to be successful. Since World War II more than half of the coups attempted against democracies succeeded, but two out of three of those attempted against nondemocracies failed.

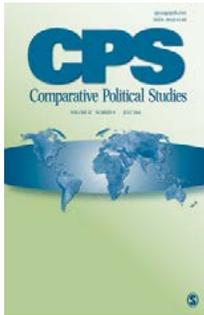
Given these findings, how might vulnerable transitional governments best avoid coups while they democratize? Past successful transitions suggest coup motivations might be reduced by improving life for military elites during democratic transitions, perhaps by giving military elites formal roles in transitional governments. This is exactly how “pacted” democracies in Latin America transitioned to civilian rule while also appeasing military leaders. In this way, military leaders have more invested in the political transition and do not need to fear a sudden and immediate loss of influence. This is the same strategy we see in Myanmar today.

These findings also highlight the importance of international actors’ using their influence to deter coups by assuring military elites that coup-led governments will be politically and economically ostracized. Coups against democracies already receive greater condemnation from world powers and international organizations. Focusing more pressure on coup-prone transitional democracies might decrease the threat of a coup d’état while encouraging further democratization in developing regions.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Military elites are powerful figures in nondemocratic governments, so they may want to retain that influence during transitions to democracy. So as to reduce coup risk, transitional governments should actively work to include them in political transitions.
- Constraints on executive authority (i.e., checks and balances) prevent the leaders of transitional democracies from “coup-proofing” as effectively as the comparatively unconstrained leaders of nondemocratic states, so international actors must work harder to preemptively condemn and prevent coups against new democracies.
- Organizations working in transitional democracies should be aware that while democratization does not increase the frequency of coup attempts, it does roughly double the chances that an attempted coup will be successful. Organizations should have contingency plans for attempted and successful coups in newly democratic states.

BACKGROUND



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Since the end of the Cold War, the military coup d'état has become the greatest threat to transitional democracies around the world. The growing list of transitional democracies undermined by coup activity includes countries as diverse as Honduras (2009), Thailand (2014), Egypt (2013), and Mali (2012). In support of the One Earth Future Foundation's work to promote good governance, Dr. Curtis Bell completed a global study of how and why coups are undermining transitional democracies. The study finds that while democratic constitutions limit repression, they also have the unfortunate consequence of keeping democratic leaders from "coup-proofing" their governments as effectively as nondemocratic leaders can. As a result, democratization actually *increases* the chances that attempted coups will be successful. Longer enduring democracies are essentially immune to coups, but new, transitional democracies face unique coup risks. The study, which was published in *Comparative Political Studies* under the title "Coup d'État and Democracy," calls attention to this problem and urges greater attention to how new democracies can, with the help of the international community, convince military elites to stay out of politics without relying on repression.



One Earth Future (OEF) Foundation leads initiatives to improve systems that prevent armed conflict. OEF is committed to improving governance structures by acting at the intersection of theory and practice, helping stakeholders solve specific problems in real time, contributing to research literature, and working to detect patterns and lessons about governance as they emerge.

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