
NAUNIHAL
SINGH
SEIZING
THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF MILITARY COUPS
POWER

Seizing Power

The Strategic Logic of Military Coups

NAUNIHAL SINGH

Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore

To my parents

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Johns Hopkins Paperback edition, 2017
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Johns Hopkins University Press
2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363
www.press.jhu.edu

ISBN 13: 978-1-4214-2256-5
ISBN 10: 1-4214-2256-5

Library of Congress Control Number for the hardcover edition:
2013949132

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For more information, please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or specialsales @press.jhu.edu.

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Acknowledgments

Thanks are due first to my advisors, the intellectual godfathers of this book, Robert Bates, Jorge Dominguez, Bear Braumoeller, and Samuel Huntington. To this number should be added a fifth, Adam Brandenburger, who served as the unofficial advisor for the game theoretic parts of the argument.

This book would not have been written without the generosity of the retired officers and enlisted men of the Ghanaian armed forces, who taught me almost everything I know about coups. Each footnote should be read as extending fulsome and effusive thanks to the individual cited. In addition, particular thanks should be extended to Eboe Hutchful, K. F. Gyimah-Boadi, General Edwin Sam, Kwesi Pratt, and Kweku Baaku, without whom the oral history I collected would not have been possible.

Funds for the field research in this book came from a Social Science Research Council International Predissertation Fellowship (1999–2000) and an Institute for the Study of World Politics Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship. Additional support was received for dissertation writing from the John M. Olin Institute and for postgraduate writing from the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Thanks also to the many students who worked with me to collect data on every single coup attempt around the world between 1945 and 2005. This part of the project took four years and required the considerable efforts of Colleen Mallahan, John Busch, Andy Bramsen, Katherine Moran, Shannon Coyne, Daniel Sportiello, Katherine Cessar, Krystin Krause, David Partida, Joe Brutto, Christina O'Donnell, Amber Herkey, and Jenna Farmer. That research was generously supported by the Kellogg Institute.

Along the way, I have benefited from the intellectual and personal support of a large number of friends and colleagues. Although they are too numerous to name individually, I want them to know that I am very grateful for all their help.

This book has reached completion largely due to the work of two editors. Suzanne Flinchbaugh at Johns Hopkins University Press believed in this project and championed it through the editorial process, and Jeanne Barker-Nunn helped me cut the fat in the manuscript and find my voice.

And last, thanks beyond all measure to my long-suffering parents, who did so much to support me, even at one point hand-counting all the words in the manuscript. There is no way to thank or appreciate them enough.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1991, in a last-ditch effort to save the Soviet Union from dissolution, a coalition of the top military and civilian leaders in the country tried to seize power from Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. The conspirators included every major official in the state apparatus except the premier himself, including the defense minister, interior minister, KGB chief, the prime minister, the secretary of the central committee, and the chief of the president's staff (Odom 1998, 310). Despite the overwhelming force the coup makers had at their disposal—including troops from the regular armed forces, the interior ministry, and the KGB—the coup attempt failed. The party, army, and intelligence services that had so ably defended the Soviets against the Nazi invasion were dismantled, and the USSR was no more.[1]

Almost ten years earlier, on New Year's Eve 1981, a young retired flight lieutenant named Jerry Rawlings led a very different military coup, in Ghana. In this attempt, Rawlings and just a handful of men managed to take control of a military of 9,000 and a country of 11,000,000. Unlike the Soviet conspirators, who commanded virtually the entire security apparatus and represented the entire state, Rawlings attacked with only ten men carrying small arms and broader alliances with mainly disgruntled enlisted men and student radicals. He staged his attack against a fairly elected (albeit highly unpopular) democratic regime at a time when Ghanaians were fed up with military intervention. His radio appeals for soldiers and civilians to join his "holy war" and "revolution" were met largely with indifference within the military and, for the first time in Ghana, even produced opposition from civilians, who had greeted prior successful coups with public jubilation. Yet, despite all these seeming obstacles, Rawlings prevailed.

Why did the 1991 USSR coup attempt fail and the 1981 Ghana coup attempt succeed? Despite an extensive scholarly literature on civil-military relations in general and coups in particular, the question of the determinants of coup outcomes has been almost entirely ignored. To address this gap, this book offers the first

[1] Making this outcome even more puzzling, there is no evidence of either widespread defection to Yeltsin or significant disobedience within the armed forces to the commands issued by the junta (Brusstar & Jones 1995, 52-53).

sustained theoretical and empirical treatment of why some coup attempts fail while others succeed. Based on almost 300 hours of interviews with coup participants and an original dataset of all coup attempts around the world between 1950 and 2000, this analysis develops and tests a novel theory of coup dynamics and outcomes.

The Importance of Understanding Coups

There are several reasons for scholars to care about coups, the most significant one being that some coup attempts have been pivotal moments in world history. At stake in the 1991 Soviet coup attempt, for example, was nothing less than the survival of the Soviet Union, a superpower that covered more territory than any other country in the world and which had a nuclear arsenal twice as large as its nearest competitor. Because this coup failed, the USSR was dismembered and the communist party dismantled, conclusively ending the Cold War. Similarly, the success of Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution led to the democratization of Portugal, the independence of the large Lusophone colonies, and the Third Wave of democratization around the world (Huntington 1991). And if the July 1944 coup attempt against Hitler had succeeded, the war in Europe might have ended very differently, with consequences for both civilians along the Eastern Front and those being slaughtered in the concentration camps. In these and other cases, the trajectory of world politics was determined by the outcome of a single coup attempt.

Even when a coup attempt does not cast a large shadow internationally, it can have a substantial impact on the lives of those who live within the affected country's borders. Some of the most cruel and venal dictators in the world have taken power via a coup, such as Indonesia's President Suharto, who killed between a half-million and a million Indonesians in the first year of his rule (Valentino 2004, 71) and is estimated to have embezzled between 15 and 35 billion dollars during his time in office (Transparency International 2004, 13). Saddam Hussein and Idi Amin were able to retain power (and murder vast numbers of their citizens) because the coup attempts that brought them to power succeeded and numerous subsequent coup attempts against them failed.

Although not every coup attempt is of critical importance domestically or internationally, the cumulative impact of coup attempts on the politics of the latter half of the twentieth century has been undeniable, with a majority of countries in the world experiencing at least one coup attempt during that period.[2] On a regional basis, 80% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 76% of countries in North Africa and the Middle East, 67% of countries in Latin America, and 50% of countries in Asia had at least one coup attempt during this period. Between 1950 and 2000, 471 coup

[2]To be precise, 55% of countries with populations more than 100,000 had at least one coup attempt between 1950 and 2000.

attempts occurred in independent countries with populations over 100,000, 238 of which succeeded and 233 of which failed. During this period, there was an average (both mean and median) of 9 coup attempts each year, ranging from a low of 3 attempts in 1998 to a high of 19 attempts in 1975. And while the frequency of coup attempts has decreased, between 1950 and 2012 there was not a single year without a coup attempt somewhere in the world. It puts these numbers in perspective to note that, between 1950 and 2000, non-Western countries had at least 30% more coup attempts than democratic elections for the executive.[3]

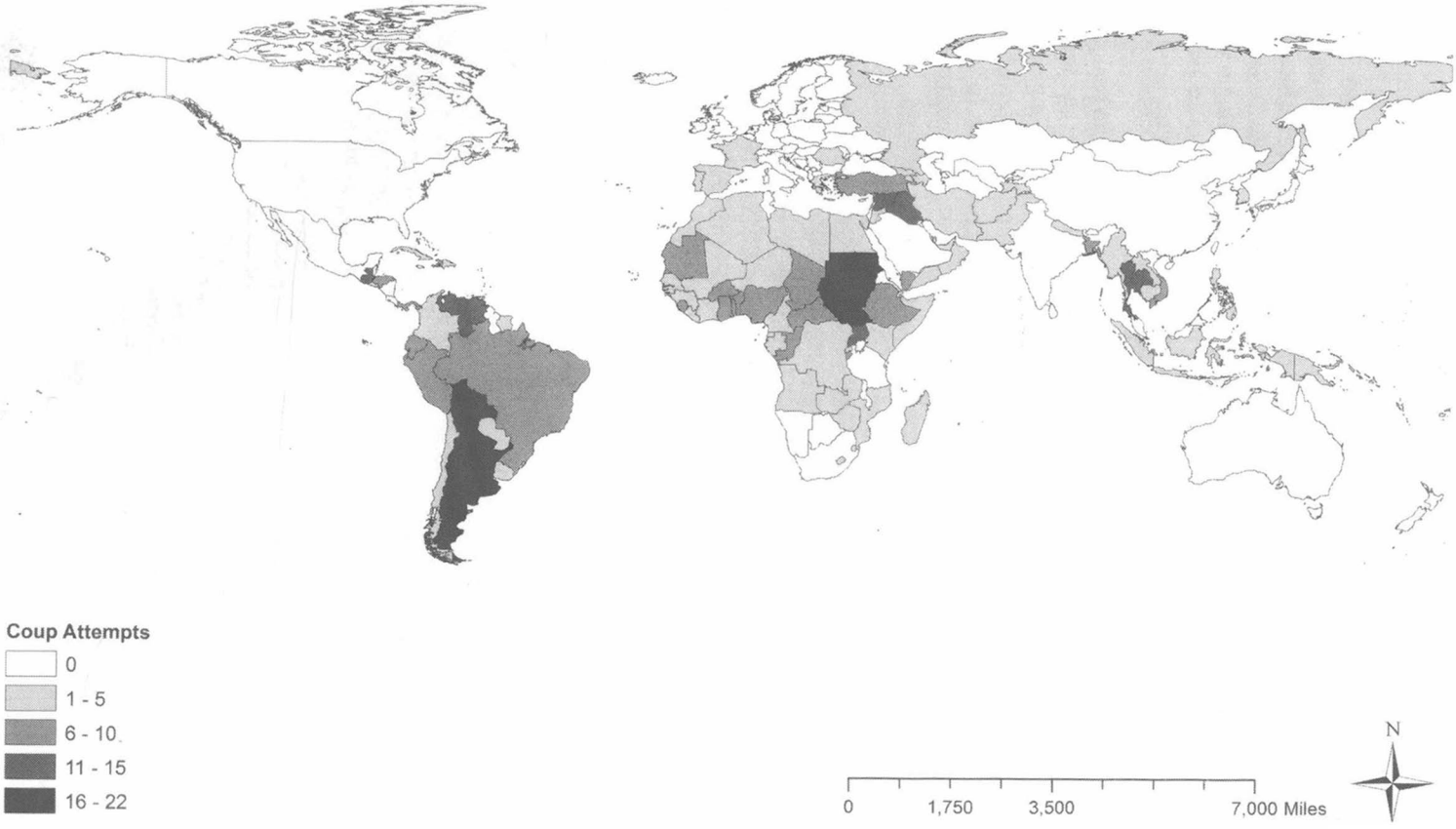
As their frequency and ubiquity suggest, coup attempts are the basic mechanism for most of the regime change and irregular leadership removal in the world. Indeed, coups are responsible for roughly 75% of democratic failures, making them the single largest danger to democracy (Goemans & Marinov 2008).[4] Nor are military coups restricted to democracies: since 1946, all monarchies that have ended have been ousted by their own armed forces (Geddes 2009), and coups are also the most common form of irregular leadership change in dictatorships. In fact, during the period addressed in this study, two-thirds of dictators were removed by coups. Despite the popular image of dictators being brought down by mass demonstrations, this is the exception rather than the rule: coups were more than six times more likely to end a dictatorship than was a popular uprising (Svolik 2008).

Successful military coups are also the primary source of regime change in general. When any regime subtype fails—whether a parliamentary democracy, presidential democracy, mixed democracy, or civilian dictatorship—it is most likely to be succeeded by a military regime (Cheibub 2007, 145). Because all military regimes are the result of successful coups but not all successful coups lead to military regimes (and some failed coups also lead to regime changes), the high rate of transition to military regimes clearly demonstrates the impact of coups. Military governments themselves are not spared the destabilizing effects of coups. To the contrary, it is well established that both military rulers and military regimes have a shorter tenure than other kinds of authoritarian regimes, lasting around four years, while other types of dictatorships stay in power at least twice as long (Brownlee 2007, Gandhi 2008, Geddes 2003, Geddes 2009, Svolik 2008). In fact, each successful coup increases the odds of a further coup, suggesting that each military government carries within it the seeds of its own removal (Londregan & Poole 1990).

[3]The estimate of the relative number of coups and democratic elections was calculated using data from the Quality of Governance Dataset. Excluding Western Europe, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the remainder of the world had an estimated 354 democratic elections for executive and 459 coup attempts. The number of executive elections was calculated by looking at democratic elections in presidential democracies, legislative elections in parliamentary elections, and both legislative and presidential elections in mixed systems. Because I erred on the side of treating all elections in mixed systems as executive elections, the estimate of executive elections is probably an overcount, so the number of coup attempts probably exceeds the number of elections by more than 30%.

[4]In addition, all countries which have suffered more than one democratic breakdown did so at the hands of the military (Cheibub 2007, 149).

Figure 1.1: Coup attempts around the world between 1950 and 2000



Understanding Coup Outcomes and Dynamics

The results of my research reveal a central point that may seem self-evident but which has been largely overlooked by most previous research: the central dynamics of a coup attempt are those that occur within the armed forces. Empirically speaking, coups fail only when they are defeated by another armed actor, who is almost always another faction within the armed forces.[5] Civilian actors have little impact on what happens between the start and end of a coup attempt; when they are able to shape events, it is only to the extent that they can influence intra-military behavior. In practice, civilians alone have no ability to defeat a coup, no matter how many demonstrate and protest. Military units are both able and willing to disperse even extremely large groups of civilians, as the Chinese Army demonstrated in Tiananmen Square.

It is easy to lose sight of the intra-military component of a coup attempt, because scholars and journalists alike commonly describe coup attempts as being committed by "the military," as if armed forces function as a unitary actor. As this book makes clear, however, every military coup attempt is primarily a struggle for power within the armed forces that, if successful, grants the victor control over the state. A coup organized by sergeants, for example, is not a coup by "the armed forces" but a coup by the lowest tier of the armed forces, whose success would threaten everybody above them in the military hierarchy, as well as remove the sitting government from power. The same argument applies at each level of the military hierarchy, as a successful coup attempt would necessarily place the challenger in a position of power over his peers and subordinates. There is an internecine power struggle involved even when officers at the apex of the command structure mount a coup attempt, as such attempts can be rejected by subordinate officers and end in failure. No coup attempt is guaranteed to succeed, no matter what the circumstances; and therefore, any group of challengers must proceed first by establishing control over the rest of the armed forces.

For these reasons, I argue that the key to understanding coup outcomes is understanding coup dynamics. Whether a coup succeeds or fails rests almost entirely upon what happens within the military once the coup attempt begins. Because usually challengers constitute only a small group within the military, so as to avoid detection, the reaction of the rest of the military to the coup attempt is critical to its eventual fate.

The argument presented in this book grows out of field research into the internal workings of coup attempts. This research was conducted in the African country of Ghana, a country with six successful coup attempts and four failed ones. There, through a combination of luck, perseverance, and most of all the generosity of many people, I was able to interview a wide range of participants from both sides in these coup attempts. I was particularly interested in the behavior of key unit

[5]Coup attempts are also foiled by the intervention of an external army, but this is infrequent. The main exceptions are the result of French forces stationed on the territory of a former colony and which intervene to protect an allied government from overthrow.

commanders stationed near the capital, since their decisions would have had an important impact on the trajectory and outcome of the coup attempt. The main insight of this book occurred when I asked these members of the military how they had reacted to the news that a coup attempt had begun.

The officers' description of their behavior was surprising to me, and it presented a very different depiction of a coup attempt than is generally found in either scholarly or journalistic accounts. As might be expected, the officers began by discussing the performance of the government, the motives of the coup makers, and the legitimacy of the coup attempt, given the political circumstances at the time—the usual factors invoked by most political scientists who have examined the phenomenon of coups. Surprisingly, however, they then went on to explain that none of these factors had played a role in their choice of which side to back at the start of the attempt. In fact, they believed that it would have been selfish to let their personal political beliefs guide their response. As officers, their first responsibility was to their men, and they felt it was wrong to use their troops, possibly endangering their lives, to support the side they preferred if it was likely to lose. Perhaps equally unexpected from military men, they were emphatic about avoiding what they described as "unnecessary violence." Although they were willing to fight to the last man to defend the country against an *external* invasion, they did not want to engage in fratricidal bloodshed that might damage the military and the country and perhaps spiral into civil war. As a result, they explained, they had cast their support to the side they believed everyone else would back as well, the side that would win rather than the one they might have wanted to win. And until they knew which side that was—the government or the challengers—they had chosen to sit on the fence, gathering information and trying not to make the situation worse.

The strategic dynamic described by these officers is what game theorists call a "coordination game." In a coordination game, each individual has an incentive to do what others are doing, and therefore each individual's choices are based on his or her beliefs about the likely actions of others. The outcome of the game is determined when these beliefs converge among the actors. If you change the players' expectations, you change their behavior as well.

In a coordination game, expectations are powerful because they can become self-fulfilling. Consider the case of a bank run, another situation modeled by a coordination game. In a situation where the bank lacks an external guarantor, depositors leave their money in the bank (and earn interest on it) when they think others will also do so, and they will join in a bank run if they think others are withdrawing their money. When people believe a bank will fail, they will pull their money out, and the bank will fail. What is more, when they believe that other depositors believe the bank will fail, they will withdraw their deposits, leading these expectations about the behavior of other depositors to become true, whether they were accurate originally or not. In other words, no matter what the level of deposits in the bank, it is the depositors' beliefs and meta-beliefs about the bank's possible failure that determine the eventual outcome.

The coordination game model captures the key dynamics of a wide range of collective action situations, whether social, economic, or political. Fads and fashions are obvious examples of coordination games, but so are a wide range of social norms and institutions that have endured for a long time. Rousseau famously described the emergence of society from the state of nature as a coordination game (individuals can choose to hunt hares alone or stags together), and revolutions can be understood in much the same way. In each of these cases, the stability of the system is based on expectations, and change is the result of altered beliefs.

A key way to create or change expectations is via communication. For communication to shape expectations, however, the information conveyed not only has to become known to all parties, but also has to be known to be known by all parties, known to be known to be known by all parties, and so on. That is, it has to create not just knowledge but meta-knowledge (and meta-meta-knowledge, etc.), or what game theorists call "common knowledge." To understand why, consider what is called the "coordinated attack problem," in which two generals are trying to schedule an attack on an enemy encampment from different locations. If they attack together, they can vanquish their foe, but if either attacks alone, they both will lose. The problem they face is that communication between the two is unreliable. It's not enough for the first general to tell the second to attack at dawn, because he doesn't know if the second general will actually receive his message. Even if the message is transmitted, however, the second will not attack without knowing that the first one knows he has successfully received the message. But, even if the second sends an acknowledgment of its receipt, that isn't enough either, because the first has to know that the second knows that the first knows, and so on. In short, coordination requires common knowledge.[6]

Because the generation of common knowledge can lead to collective action, having control over the means of creating such knowledge is very important for those who hold power or those who hope to pry it from them (Chwe 2001, 10). Overthrowing a dictatorship is a coordination game, one in which political actors want to join the protests if others are participating and want to stay at home if others stay at home. For this reason, dictatorships prize outward shows of conformity, especially on ritualized public occasions, because such displays strengthen the expectations that keep the system working. Conversely, they heavily regulate public gatherings and mass media because these can be used to create expectations that could undermine the regime. A single radio broadcast is likely to be far more damaging than a banned cassette tape smuggled hand to hand; one public speech to a group is more of a danger than private conversations with an equivalent number of individuals.

When applied to coups, this understanding of the dynamics of coordination games provides insights into how to make or foil a coup attempt. For challengers, the key is to use common knowledge to shape expectations in a way favorable to

[6]Scholars of the epistemology of game theory argue that an infinite tower of meta-knowledge is required, with each level of meta-knowledge equally important (Aumann 1976). In practice, however, humans appear to assume that everybody is boundedly rational and instead use a heuristic which says anything more than three levels deep is plenty (Nagel 1995).