



Military coups: a very short introduction

by Florence Gaub

Until three years ago, it was widely perceived in Europe that the era of military intervention in politics was over: strongmen like Idi Amin and Hafez al-Assad were long dead, and the world had seen the likes of Mubarak toppled and Pinochet voted out of power. The armed forces appeared to have returned to the barracks for good. Although the coups in Egypt and Thailand, in 2013 and 2014, respectively, were a reminder that the military can still play a political role, it was the recent failed coup attempt in Turkey which drove this point home.

As the military's *raison d'être* is clearly the defence of a state, any venture by it into politics is generally seen as an anomaly – yet this repeatedly occurs. So why (and when) do coups happen? Mainly for four reasons: the armed forces have the *capacity*, the *interest*, *no legitimate opponent* and a degree of *popular support*. If all four elements are not present, however, a coup will fail – as was, arguably, the case in Turkey.

Because they can: the 'how to'

Forcefully removing a government requires mainly one thing: the ability of a sufficient number of people to act as a collective. Few institutions in any country possess this capacity in the way the

armed forces do: after all, coups, like wars, are an endeavour of collective action. The military can mobilise large numbers of people, despite a comparatively small leadership, without encountering internal resistance or having to explain decisions. It is precisely this ability which allows a modern military not only to wage war effectively, but also to undertake political action. The fact that it also controls the largest amount of destructive (and deterring) power in a state is but secondary to this collective capacity – after all, police forces are armed, too, but they do not possess the capacity to move many people in an organised fashion with a single command.

The engine of the military machine is the officer corps, which usually constitutes 3%-15% of the armed forces and issues orders to frontline units. Coups are consequently almost exclusively triggered by the officer corps rather than foot soldiers – and more often by senior officers (such as colonels and generals) than junior ones. A successful coup does not require the active participation of all officers or units; instead, the plotters need to be able to single out the crucial units in the command structure and co-opt them, actively neutralise those which might oppose them, and move too fast for others to prevent the coup from happening.



Depending on the specific situation of a given country, as little as 2% of the armed forces can execute a successful coup. Critical units can range from the size of a battalion (1,000 troops) to a brigade (3,000-5,000 troops), and the number of officers involved can be limited to 10 company commanders, 5 battalion leaders, as well as 15-45 commanders in various support arms.

These troops are then used to capture critical infrastructure in order to create a situation in which the government in power has no alternative but to step down (if it has not already been neutralised by force). Putschists often strike while the head of state is out of the country or on holiday in a remote location. And they usually act at night, and more often than not in summer – mainly because decision-makers are away and because tanks find it easier to manoeuvre in streets with less traffic. Principal targets are the centres of effective power such as the offices of head of state; the main administrative buildings such as the ministry of defence or police headquarters; and symbolic buildings or landmarks. Coups are therefore usually launched in the capital of the country.

In addition, the military usually attempts to close off the main roads leading in and out of the capital and control traffic focal points in order to halt the movement of potential opposition forces, and occupy airports and other transport hubs to prevent the escape of former government officials. Radio and TV stations are also prime targets to control information flows – an aspect which has, however, evolved with the advent of social media.

Because they want to: the ‘what for’

Just because a military has the capacity to oust a government does not mean it will choose to do so. Instead, the armed forces tend to venture into the political realm when their institutional interests are not being looked after or are jeopardised by the existing government. Needless to say, the armed forces usually cloak their own interests in national narratives. A glance at some

of the past ‘communiqué No.1’ (the military’s first announcement after a coup) demonstrates this: in Syria in 1961, the military announced it aimed to ‘remove corruption and tyranny’ and ‘restore the legitimate rights of the people’; in Argentina in 1976, the military took over to tackle the ‘institutional, social, and administrative chaos’; and in Nigeria in 1966, the army claimed the coup was carried out in order to act against ‘the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10%; those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers or VIPs at least, the tribalists, the nepotists’.

It is usually a combination of financial, strategic, tactical and political reasons which motivates the armed forces to strike. Financially, most military forces which stage a coup are underfunded and overstretched: the lower the defence budget, the likelier coups become, and coups are least likely in states with high military spending. Putschist armies are also more often than not involved in a violent conflict, and disagree with the civilian leadership over the strategic and tactical responses. In addition, civilian meddling in military dismissals, recruitment, promotions and appointments has in the past created resentment in the institution before a coup occurred.

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Lastly, political considerations can also play a role as there is a slight correlation between the officer corps and middle class. Where the latter’s values are not aligned with those of the regime, officers may feel compelled to act on behalf of their social class. It is, however, important to note that this does not

necessarily imply that a middle class is secular or democratically-minded.

Because there is nobody: the ‘who else’

Armed forces find it easier to topple civilian governments which are lacking legitimacy, suffering from a political crisis and have failed to establish constructive civil-military relations. If the military decides to act against the government, it indicates there has also been a failure on the part of the civilian side, too: a failure to

deter or counter such a move, a failure to detect frustration and ambition within the armed forces, or a failure to establish the levels of cooperation necessary for effective defence. Simply put, the civilian government will have failed to create a situation in which the armed forces are given enough freedom to ensure the defence of the country, but are firmly kept in place as an institutional service provider.

Broadly speaking, there are four ways in which leaders can fail to engage in constructive civil-military relations: first, if they mainly use punitive measures to keep the armed forces in check. Second, if they maintain too great a distance from the armed forces. Third, if they deliberately politicise the military to bolster their own position. And fourth, if they lack the necessary legitimacy to control the armed forces.

Coup-proofing is a popular technique to curb the power of the armed forces, but has the unfortunate side effect of rendering the military inefficient. It consists mainly of punitive measures, ranging from the establishment of a parallel security force to the use of threats and force to keep the officer corps under control, and to meddling with regular military procedures in order to undermine cohesion. But civilians who want to effectively control the military while preserving its operational capacity have other means available. Examples include constitutional constraints (who is the authority responsible for declaring war, for instance), clear delineations of the military's responsibilities, civilian control over military budgets and doctrines, and civilian monitoring of military activities.

Some civilian regimes operate largely separately from their military organisations – for fear of interference or due to a lack of understanding. But constructive and professional civil-military relations do not necessarily depend on the degree to which the armed forces are separate from the civilian realm; indeed, too much distance between the two worlds leads to a breakdown of relations altogether. A lack of civilian input leads to a stagnant military doctrine, as it is no

longer in line with the country's grand strategy, whereas a lack of military input into civilian decision-making leads to strategic mistakes. But in terms of political involvement, civilians also need to be aware of what preoccupies the military if they want to prevent a potential coup. This concerns three areas of civil-military relations in particular: the political decision-making process, the social composition of the officer corps, and military doctrine.

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Civilians increase the likelihood of a coup by politicising the military in two ways: from the top down (i.e. the government) or the bottom up (i.e. groups in society). In both cases, any attempt to draw the armed forces into politics is a sign of weakness. Governments,

for example, may be dependent on the military (say, as a result of war or domestic crises) or lack of legitimacy, whereas civilians may call on the military when political institutions fail and there is no constitutional means for expressing discontent. This can happen in systems which are not participatory at all or where authoritarianism is so entrenched that token elections alone are unlikely to trigger change. In these cases, civilians will seek to bring about the desired change through a revolution.

Military forces will also find it easier to act against a regime which is perceived to lack legitimacy. Governments can acquire legitimacy in different ways: traditional legitimacy evolves over time (e.g. long-term rule in dictatorships or inherited rule in monarchies); legal legitimacy is derived from the law, i.e. the ruler is elected or appointed according to a transparent and formalised system; and charismatic legitimacy (*à la* Max Weber) is based on an individual's attributes that qualify him or her to lead in the eyes of the people. Legitimacy is therefore independent from the political system, and can exist in authoritarian systems, as well as in democratic ones.

What matters more than *how* the leader has acquired popular consent to rule is the degree of *consensus* in society. Where such a consensus exists, it will be more difficult – if not impossible – for the armed forces to remove the regime as

they would go against popular will. It is important to note that legitimacy is a process: leaders have to deliver on needs such as security, representation or welfare, or their legitimacy will be questioned by both the institutions and the citizenry.

Coups since 1950

- 473 coups and coup attempts have occurred
- 46.9% were successful, 53.1% ended in failure

Because the people want it: the ‘who for’

Lastly, a military force can launch a coup with the support of the population at large. The main reason why civilians welcome such a move is that the armed forces tend to foster a positive image of themselves. First of all, military values such as discipline, bravery, obedience, honesty, and political impartiality are generally valued in society at large. The armed forces also claim to represent, and are seen to represent, the nation and the state as a whole: nationalism feeds this perception of a symbolic institution often called the ‘cradle of the state’. In part, this is because the armed forces are, by design, the defender of the state and, through their staff, members of the society they are sworn to serve.

In addition to their symbolism, in many countries the armed forces came to represent modernity, progress, technological innovation in the years following independence. Although this has worn off a little because of modernisation and economic development, it mattered in the 1940s and 1950s: modernisation theory posited that the armed forces were a quasi-‘natural’ moderniser simply because military technology would make its leaders sensitive to the underdevelopment of the surrounding traditional societies. While this is an overstatement, in certain countries, the armed forces did indeed contribute to the strengthening of a hitherto small middle class, with individuals using the military to climb the social ladder and get closer to power.

Perhaps more important than the armed forces’ image as an efficient moderniser and symbol of the state is that military values stand in stark contrast to the notoriously negative image of political leaders and institutions (in particular political parties and parliaments). Where politics is polarised and divisive, a ‘neutral and unbiased’ institution is seen as a positive counter-

example. Coups therefore tend to take place in the context of a political crisis, and when the armed forces believe they have a civilian mandate to resolve the turmoil. This does not imply that riots and widespread discontent justify the military’s interference in politics, but it does explain why the armed forces may feel compelled to act in accordance with the public mood.

This also explains why military forces are quick to use the word ‘revolution’ rather than ‘coup’ to describe their actions. While both events have the same outcome – a change in government – the major difference is the amount of people involved. In the case of a coup, usually only a portion of the armed forces (and an even smaller element of society) takes part; a revolution, in contrast, is a mass event. The use of the word ‘revolution’ therefore suggests that the armed forces are acting on behalf of the population rather than for themselves. And stressing the popular mandate for a coup is crucial as it provides an indispensable justification for the overthrow of the government.

While the armed forces might be propelled to power on the back of social capital, society will judge them ultimately on their performance while in power. Exercising governance is a challenging endeavour and has left military forces which did seize power depleted of the popular capital they previously enjoyed.

The distinction between the positive image the armed forces have as an institution, and the negative image when governing plays an important role in a military’s decision to strike. After all, it is well documented that military forces fare worse than their civilian counterparts when it comes to governance.

Florence Gaub is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

