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From Pawn to President

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From Pawn to President: The Causes and Strategy of Coups d'Etat
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Public Policy Program

Overview

• This study attempts to clarify the causes of coups d’Etat, which still occur at alarming rates within less-developed nations.
• Previous research has focused on three potential motivations: greed, grievance, and feasibility.
• Greed: High levels of natural resources such as oil can easily be diverted into personal accounts, making a successful coup more profitable.
• Grievance: Repression or poor governance may lead to rebellion.
• Feasibility: A game-theoretic explanation in which coups are attempted simply because their success seems likely.

Theoretical Framework

1. Mean levels of key independent variables measuring greed, grievance, and feasibility are compared for coup and non-coup country-years.
2. A more rigorous statistical analysis employs three probit regression models with panel data for over 150 countries from 1945-1999.
a) Control variables for economic, demographic, and political and geographic factors are included for robustness; several key variables are lagged to account for endogeneity.

Data

• Data on coup attempts was obtained from the Center for Systemic Peace’s comprehensive list for the years 1945-2008.
• Independent and control variables were obtained from Fearon and Laitin’s “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War” article which appeared in American Political Science Review vol. 97(1) in 2003.

Comparison of Key Variables

Results

• Greed: No significant impact on the likelihood of a coup attempt was found.
• Grievance: Mixed results as ethnic fractionalization positively affects coup risk while religious fractionalization decreases coup risk.
• Polity II measures for repression only affect risk when instability measures are high.
• Feasibility: Instability and anocracy positively affect coup risk in each model specification.
• When controlling for other factors, unstable regimes are between 21% and 26% more likely to experience a coup attempt.

Policy Implications

• Attempts to prevent attempted coups d’Etat should focus on reducing the likelihood that an attempted coup would be successful. Two possible ways of limiting the chances of coup success are:
  1. Foreign aid targeted to improve the quality and strength of central governments.
  2. Agreements with vulnerable governments to guarantee their return to power if a coup attempt should succeed at their removal (Collier 2009).

References


"[T]he coup d'Etat can pre-empt revolution, or lead to it. It can install a military, or an alternative civilian government. It can maintain, or change, social policy.”

-Ruth First