Coercion & Military Rule

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Thomson asks three questions: why have so many military coups occurred in Africa; what problems do military regimes encounter which civilian ones do not; and have military regimes fared better than civilian ones, ceteris paribus? In answering the first question, Thomson writes that the 71 coups d'etat up to 1990 can be better analysed by dividing them into three categories: guardianship, veto, and breakthrough revolts. Depending on the specific political circumstances of a country, the military may see its role in society as either the guardian of the national interest from corruption or disruptive social change; in some cases, it may itself seek to revolutionise society. However it is important to remember that militaries must first possess the means to affect a coup and prevent counter-revolution. Most significantly, militaries must also feel that their role in society is existentially threatened before resorting to a coup: in other words, coups take place when it is in the military's *corporate interest* to overthrow the state.

Once in charge, military regimes face the same challenges as the previous government but with even less political experience and no constitutional legitimacy. Worse still, the precedent of violent regime change has been established, and the new junta is expected to succeed where civilian government had failed. As a result, these states often resort to the expediency of old client-patron relationships and relying on bureaucrats to administer the country. Typically, they perform no better than civilian administrations at keeping political promises (with the notable exception of better pay to soldiers). Military regimes also tend to shore up their legitimacy by creating single-party states.

Thomson presents Uganda as a case study in military rule. After independence, the royalists and UPC formed a tenuous alliance until Obote's party purged their partners with military assistance. By building up military power to consolidate his position, Amin was ironically well positioned to influence politics without civilian oversight. When Obote was out-of-country in 1971, Amin seized power. Why was the situation favourable to a coup? Without institutions to absorb dissent from disenfranchised ethnicities, there was little sympathy for the constitutional government, and Amin's own position within the administration was insecure when Obote moved to sideline this potential rival for power (with Amin under suspicion for murder, he certainly faced a Rubicon River decision).

After taking power, Amin's empty promises for reform went unfulfilled. Foreign economic interests were nationalised and foreigners were themselves exiled. Political opponents and dissidents were simply murdered. The military's ranks grew in number but turned against one another in factional infighting. To release the mounting pressure, Amin invaded Tanzania to orient the country's politics against an external enemy; this backfired disastrously and led to his

removal from power and exile. Political violence persisted even in the aftermath, only ending when the National Resistance Movement finally broke the cycle of coup and counter-coup. Amin's reign throughout this period was an exceptional case of personalised and military rule, so simple in its brutality that it almost defies analysis along the dimensions which Thomson describes. Certainly, Amin's personal interest and the military's immediate self-interest were were served at the expense of all others, but almost no effort was made towards even the appearance of legitimacy. Perhaps a less egregious example would have been more illustrative of the trends and phenomena which the author discusses.