

Political Leadership Survival in the Aftermath of Coups or Overstays: From Illegitimate Ascent to Unexpected Exit

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Abstract

Previous research predominantly focused on the disruption of regular leadership tenures by unexpected events, such as coups, self-coups, uprisings, rebellions, civil wars, or revolutions. In contrast, this study aims to delve into the longevity of leaders who ascend to power through these very unexpected events, specifically coups or overstays. The central argument posits that the endurance of political leadership is influenced not only by their actions and policies in office but also by the means through which they come to power. Employing a survival model, this research investigates the disparities in survival rates between leaders who rise to power via coups and those who overstay their terms, and seeks to elucidate the underlying reasons for these differences.

Keywords: Political survival, Coups, Overstays

1 Introduction

The question of why some leaders maintain their hold on power for extended periods, spanning decades, while others witness their leadership cut short after mere years, months, or even days, has captivated scholars and researchers in the field of political science. This inquiry has been extensively explored in numerous works, as evidenced by notable contributions such as those by [Clinton \(1975\)](#) and [Bueno de Mesquita et al. \(2003\)](#).

In their seminal work, Bueno de Mesquita and his colleagues undertake a comprehensive examination of leaders across a diverse political landscape, encompassing democracies and autocracies, parliamentary and presidential systems, and both civilian and military contexts. However, it is worth noting that a significant number of political leaders, especially in democratic countries, adhere to regular and predictable tenures. An illustrative example can be found in the United States, where presidents may serve up to eight years if they secure a second term, even in cases of suboptimal performance. Similarly, in autocratic Mexico from 1919 to 2000, each president served a fixed six-year term without facing overthrows or overstay. In such contexts, the investigation of tenure length is of marginal significance, as power transitions between leaders typically occur within the established framework of constitutional rules or unwritten conventions.

Given the distinctive nature of political leader survival in different regimes, scholars have increasingly focused on the unexpected tenures, namely those leaders who do not complete their original terms or those who overstay their mandates. This shift in focus stems from the fact that some leaders are toppled by coups, uprisings, rebellions, civil wars, or revolutions, while others successfully navigate lawful or unlawful challenges. Previous research on the longevity of political leaders predominantly centers on two primary dimensions. The first dimension encompasses the contextual conditions and resources available to leaders, including factors such as their personal competence ([Yu & Jong-A-Pin 2016](#)), the stability of their society ([Arriola 2009](#)), economic performance ([Palmer & Whitten 1999](#), [Williams \(2011\)](#)), access to natural resources ([Smith 2004](#), [Quiroz Flores & Smith 2012](#)), and external support networks ([Licht 2009](#), [Wright 2008](#), [Thyne et al. \(2017\)](#)). The second dimension delves into the strategies employed by leaders in enacting their political and economic policies ([Gandhi & Przeworski 2007](#), [Morrison 2009](#)), as well as

their responses to challenges and dissent within their regimes (Escribà-Folch 2013, Davenport et al. 2021).

Unsurprisingly, a substantial portion of the existing research on political survival predominantly centers on coups, as they represent the most common pathways to the exit of authoritarian leaders (Svolik 2008, Frantz & Stein 2016). Previous literature has primarily delved into the survival of leadership in terms of strategies aimed at preventing coups (Powell 2017, Sudduth 2017a, De Bruin 2020), or how leaders can extend their tenures after surviving failed coup attempts (Easton & Siverson 2018).

However, on one hand, the duration of political leaders' tenures can be significantly influenced by unforeseen events like coups. On the other hand, these very unexpected events that usher in new leaders can also become the catalyst for the subsequent cycle of unexpected developments. It is conceivable that leaders who come to power through regular and constitutional transitions are more likely to undergo periodic shifts in leadership, while those who seize power through unconstitutional means face a higher risk of unanticipated removal from office. Unfortunately, there has been a limited emphasis on the study of leadership survival in the context of successful coups. A similar research gap exists in the examination of incumbents who overstay their terms in power, which forms the central focus of this paper.

The analysis of their tenures holds particular significance for two reasons. Firstly, the duration of these leaders' tenures exhibits considerable variation, ranging from mere months to several decades. Secondly, predicting the tenures of such leaders proves challenging. A seemingly robust and stable regime can collapse suddenly overnight, while an apparently fragile one might persist for decades. The substantial disparities in these tenures remain inadequately explained, posing a perplexing challenge that has piqued the interest of numerous political scientists.

Expanding on the discourse surrounding coups and leaders who overstay their intended terms, this paper delves into the trajectories of political leaders who came to power through coups or extended their mandates beyond the originally intended tenure. The central objective is to examine the variations in survival duration between leaders who attain power through coups and those who exceed their terms, while also shedding light on the underlying factors contributing to these

distinctions.

This paper follows a structured approach as outlined below: The second section encompasses a comprehensive literature review on political survival and highlighting the contributions of this paper might offer. The third chapter delves into the examination of factors influencing the survival of leaders who have ascended to power through unconstitutional means. Chapter 4 provides an account of the methodology and data employed, utilizing a survival model for a comprehensive analysis of the determinants of leaders' survival. The subsequent chapter, Chapter 5, presents the findings of this analysis, facilitating an in-depth discussion of the results. Finally, in Chapter 6, the paper concludes by synthesizing these findings and exploring their broader implications.

2 Literature review: The dynamics of leadership survival in different scenarios

In their ambitious work, [Bueno de Mesquita et al. \(2003\)](#) set out to provide a comprehensive explanation for the logic of political leadership survival within a universal framework. According to this framework, the endurance of political leaders hinges on the maintenance of a supportive winning coalition. However, it is essential to notice that the dynamics of leadership survival differ significantly across various types of regimes.

In democratic systems, distinctions emerge between parliamentary and presidential regimes. For instance, in parliamentary countries such as the UK and Japan, political parties may maintain power for extended periods, even as prime ministers change frequently. A contemporary example is the United Kingdom in 2022, which saw three different prime ministers while the Conservative Party retained its grip on power. In contrast, in presidential countries like the United States, leaders are subject to fixed terms, making power transitions more regular and predictable.

Moreover, the concept of dividing the electorate into a selectorate and a winning coalition may not be as relevant in democracies. While those who support and vote for incumbents may witness their preferred policies enacted, those who vote against them still experience the same policies. For instance, individuals who cast their votes for candidates advocating lower taxes

face the same tax rates as those who vote against the incumbents. This doesn't result in lower taxes for supporters and higher taxes for opponents; rather, both groups encounter identical tax levels. Consequently, it becomes challenging to argue that winning coalitions inherently gain a significant advantage over the broader electorate in democratic systems.

On the other hand, there are types of autocratic regimes, each with its distinct characteristics, including civilian autocracy, personnel autocracy, military regimes, party dominance, and monarchies. In most autocratic regimes, the process of leadership selection remains veiled in secrecy. For instance, in countries like China, the mechanisms for appointing leaders often resemble a black box, concealing the rules and procedures from outsiders. Expressing dissenting views, whether as potential challengers or supporters of challengers, can be perilous. In Russia, despite the presence of general elections, challengers frequently face severe consequences such as assassination, poisoning, imprisonment, or exile. As a result of the absence of transparent and fair conventional procedures for power transitions, leaders in autocratic regimes are more vulnerable to being deposed through coups or other unconventional means.

Beyond distinctions among various regimes, the endurance of leaders can fluctuate even within the confines of a single regime, contingent on the circumstances they encounter. It stands to reason that leaders ascending through conventional means may experience a different survival trajectory compared to those ushered in by coups or those who overstay their terms. Additionally, leaders operating in favorable economic, social, and international contexts are likely to have a more prolonged tenure compared to their counterparts navigating challenging conditions.

Considering the factors discussed earlier, a substantial portion of existing literature seeks to unravel the underlying principles governing political survival in non-democratic regimes. Notably, scholarly attention has gravitated towards the examination of coup-proofing strategies, given that coups emerge as a primary driver of irregular exits in autocracies ([Quinlivan 1999](#), [Powell 2014](#), [Sudduth 2017a](#), [Tang & Li 2021](#)). Additionally, there is a notable focus on the study of survival strategies following failed coup attempts, as evidenced by the works of ([Kebschull 1994](#), [Easton & Siverson 2018](#), [Oztig & Donduran 2020](#)).

In [Sudduth \(2017b\)](#), the author delves into the post-coup actions of a dictator, despite the pri-

mary focus of the paper being on purge strategies. The central argument asserts that leaders who rise to power through coups experience a temporary surge in influence compared to the elites immediately following the coups, making them less susceptible to being ousted by subsequent coup attempts. This assertion, as highlighted by the author, challenges the conventional notion that new leaders are generally in a position of weakness in the initial stages of their tenure (Roessler 2011). Regardless of their initial strength, both Sudduth and previous scholars concur that new leaders are inclined to purge rival elite groups to bolster their power. The distinction lies in Sudduth's claim that dictators undertake purges when they possess the capability to do so without significant risk, while conventional views posit that dictators resort to purges when compelled to prevent potential ousting by coups.

Yet, it's important to recognize that new leaders, especially those who ascend through unconventional means, don't conform to a universal pattern of being either inherently weak or powerful. Leadership transitions occur in diverse contexts, and thus, leaders face a spectrum of challenges. Some emerge in positions of vulnerability, while others wield considerable strength. Regardless of individual power, when juxtaposed with the entirety of elites or the entire population, leaders remain in a position of relative weakness—unity among elites or residents can overshadow even the most powerful leaders.

3 The logic of political leader survival in irregular ascensions

Engaging in a discourse on the survival strategies of political leaders within non-democratic regimes presents a significant challenge. The complexity stems from the lack of a universal pattern that encapsulates the rules or conventions dictating power transitions in autocratic systems. For instance, even in Middle Eastern monarchies, the transfer of power doesn't rigidly adhere to a father-to-son lineage. However, this doesn't imply that analyzing survival strategies in autocracies is unattainable. Despite substantial differences, they share certain commonalities. Most autocratic regimes, especially those characterized by irregular ascensions, exhibit three prevalent situations.

The first aspect concerns the issue of legitimacy. Leaders who ascend through coups lack legitimacy as they seize power through force or other unconventional means. While many leaders prolong their tenures through a façade of constitutional procedures, such as judgments by the Supreme Court, congressional votes, or even referendums, they often manipulate these processes to maintain control. It's commonly understood by ruling elites, opposition parties, and the populace that these leaders lack legitimacy. This lack of legitimacy can sometimes justify the cause of those seeking their replacement, even if the means used are unconstitutional.

The second characteristic revolves around the uncertainty surrounding power transitions. This uncertainty creates ambiguity not only for ruling elites and ordinary citizens but also for the leaders themselves regarding when, how, and to whom power might be transferred. Such uncertainty breeds inherent instability. Amidst such instability, people experience a lack of security. This perception often leads to the belief that the current ruler is incompetent and should be replaced by someone more powerful or capable. Consequently, the ruling elite or opposition factions may exploit the instability as an opportunity to challenge existing power structures.

The third aspect involves the collective action problem within the opposition. As highlighted in the introduction, expressing dissenting views in autocratic systems, either as potential challengers or supporters of challengers, can be perilous. The absence of free public expression renders the power balance unclear. Beyond small, close-knit groups, it becomes impossible to discern who supports the incumbent and who opposes them. Attempts to determine the numbers of supporters or opponents and efforts to unite different anti-incumbent factions can also be risky. Consequently, anti-incumbent forces often maintain a low profile for safety until a particular group gains the confidence to succeed.

The trifecta of illegitimacy, uncertainty, and collective action issues profoundly impact the longevity of a regime. Yet, compared to leaders who gain power through coups, those who overstay their terms find themselves in a comparatively advantageous position concerning these three aspects.

3.1 Legitimacy

As per Powell and Thyne's definition, coups constitute "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive." (Powell & Thyne 2011, p.252). While it is undeniable that a few coups have been justified by resolving crises and leading to improved outcomes, they remain illegal means to remove incumbents. These unlawful methods open Pandora's box, publicly suggesting alternatives to constitutional procedures for seizing power, particularly in the case of successful coups. Such actions inevitably prompt imitators to launch new coups. As society becomes accustomed to coups, subsequent ones may not elicit significant backlash, given that the incumbents themselves ascended to power through similar means. Furthermore, coups not only invite further coups but also embolden external challengers, including uprisings, revolutions, and civil wars (Dahl & Gleditsch 2023).

On the other hand, leaders who overstay their tenures may lack legitimacy but often manage to maintain power through a facade of legitimacy. They don't blatantly seize power via military force but rather cling to power through parliamentary or congressional processes, the Supreme Court, and even nationwide referendums. The opposition usually chooses to confront these leaders using legal means, engaging in legislative debates or legal proceedings, and sometimes by advocating for another referendum. Attempts to overthrow leaders who overstay their terms through coups would be even less legitimate and might struggle to garner support. However, removing such leaders within the boundaries of the law presents an arduous challenge, if not a near-impossible task.

3.2 Uncertainty and instability

As discussed earlier, both coup-entry leaders and overstaying rulers bring about uncertainty for their regimes. However, there is less uncertainty in regimes of overstay. Most overstayers try to stay in office as long as they could. The only uncertainty lies in how long they could manage to do so. As in the cases of Putin in Russia and Xi Jinping in China, it is less likely they will voluntarily step down unless they are ousted by force. Coup-entry leaders, on the other hand, face more uncertainty. Most coups would take a good excuse for the actions. Some of them claimed the

action as the defense of the democratic order, as in the case of President Manuel Zelaya's oust in Honduras in 2009. Some of them claimed to protect the constitution, as the case of President Mamadou Tandja's overthrown in Niger in 2010 ([Ginsburg & Elkins 2019](#)). The trick is that some of them did keep their words and returned the power to a constitutional successor. In the coup in Niger in 2010, a new constitution restored civilian power, and restated the absolute two-term limit on the presidency. Most others, however, hold the office and refused to step down, as in the coup in Chile in 1973. Therefore, there are more uncertainties after coups. Will they succeed in the end (how long will they hold the power)? How do they decide the ways of governance? How do they share the power inside supporters and those they will to cooperate? Will they keep their words? Are there backlash from the ousted rulers' alliances or other opposition factions? Will they be better or even worse than the previous ones?

Uncertainty arise instability. More uncertainties in regimes following coups are clearly more prone to instability. In most cases, coups occur amidst chaotic situations, with coup leaders using the pretext of restoring order. To expedite the restoration of order, leaders emerging from coups may find themselves compelled to make compromises among various internal or external factions. As noted by [Roessler \(2011\)](#), these rulers might try to reduce the likelihood of further coups at the cost of increasing the risk of societal rebellions and civil wars. This is also the logic of the Chinese ruler, Chiang Kai-shek, in 1930s. In order to eliminate the internal threats, Chinese Communist Party, he resorted to a strategy of compromise with both Japan and the Soviet Union. "Domestic stability takes precedence over resisting foreign invasion" was one of the most commonly used slogans by Chiang Kai-shek during that time [Chu \(1999\)](#).

3.3 Uncertainty and Instability

As previously discussed, both leaders who come into power via coups and those who overstay their terms contribute to uncertainty within their regimes. However, regimes led by overstaying rulers tend to harbor less uncertainty overall. Most of overstaying leaders would strive to prolong their time in office for as long as possible. The only uncertainty in these cases revolves around how long they can maintain their rule. For instance, figures like Putin in Russia and Xi Jinping

in China are less inclined to voluntarily step down unless forcibly removed from power.

Conversely, leaders brought to power through coups face greater uncertainty. Most coups are justified through various excuses or claims. Some assert their actions as a defense of democratic order, exemplified by President Manuel Zelaya's ousting in Honduras in 2009. Others claim to protect the constitution, such as President Mamadou Tandja's overthrow in Niger in 2010 ([Ginsburg & Elkins 2019](#)). The complexity arises when some coup leaders actually honor their promises and transfer power to a constitutional successor. For instance, after the 2010 coup in Niger, a new constitution restored civilian power and reinstated a strict two-term limit on the presidency in the same year. However, many others refuse to step down and retain power, as seen in the 1973 coup in Chile. Therefore, post-coup scenarios tend to harbor more uncertainties. Uncertainties stem from concerns about how long they will remain in power, their strategies for governance, the distribution of power among their supporters and potential allies, their dedication to fulfilling promises, possible backlash from alliances or opposition factions of ousted rulers, and whether they will bring about improvements or exacerbate the situation compared to previous leaders.

These uncertainties lead to instability, particularly in regimes post-coups. Often, coups transpire amidst chaotic circumstances, with coup leaders justifying their actions as necessary for restoring order. To hasten the restoration of order, these leaders may find themselves obliged to compromise among various internal or external factions. As noted by [Roessler \(2011\)](#), these rulers might attempt to decrease the likelihood of further coups, potentially raising the risk of societal rebellions and civil wars. This approach echoes the strategy of the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s. In his bid to eliminate the internal threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party, he pursued a strategy of compromise with both Japan and the Soviet Union. "Domestic stability takes precedence over resisting foreign invasion" was one of the most commonly used slogans by Chiang Kai-shek during that period ([Chu 1999](#)).

3.4 Collective action challenges

Autocracies are often governed by a minority faction that possesses a well-organized structure, contrasting sharply with decentralized and unorganized subjects. Even in the face of protests or rebellions, ruling groups can systematically suppress these incidents individually. If the subjects could unite their efforts, overthrowing tyranny might become feasible. However, the significant hurdle lies in the immense difficulty of overcoming the collective action problem. Dictators in autocracies primarily adopt a ruling strategy aimed at preventing unity among subjects and complicating efforts to tackle collective action problems. This explains why dictatorships restrict free expression, assembly, and association. In their pursuit of this strategy, they are willing to risk compromising their ability to fend off external threats. This situation is prevalent in long-term ruler regimes, which tend to exhibit relative stability. It is this stability that enables rulers to weaken both their subjects and internal elites. A prime example of this can be seen in Russia's ongoing conflict, where despite being the world's second most powerful military, Russia faces challenges in the invasion war against Ukraine, a smaller military force.

Conversely, regimes post-coups often grapple with higher instability, compelling rulers to prioritize the restoration of stability. However, these rulers face a dilemma. If they resort to harsh actions against internal elites—some of whom are their supporters or close allies—they risk weakening themselves or inciting backlash, as witnessed in the case of Bokassa's coup in 1966 in the Central African Republic. On the other hand, when dealing with external threats, even if suppression tactics succeed, they may inadvertently empower new internal factions, thereby creating new threats. This scenario mirrors Napoleon's challenges in France during the 1790s.

Survival in power relies significantly on the cohesion of the ruling group. As numerous scholars have pointed out, internal conflicts among elites pose a more serious threat to the stability of those in power. Coups often lay bare the fractures within a regime, not only attracting more followers to orchestrate new coups but also emboldening external challengers, including uprisings, revolutions, and civil wars. On the other hand, successful tenures unmistakably showcase the incumbents' firm grasp on power, discouraging both internal dissent and external threats.

For leaders who ascend to power through coups or overstay their tenure, these conflicts typify

their rules. Following coups, regimes face four potential outcomes: democracies initially overthrown by coups may either persist as democracies (I) or transform into autocracies (II), while autocracies overthrown by coups may either endure as autocracies (III) or evolve into democracies (IV). However, even in democracies reinstated after coups, a degree of uncertainty lingers. In contrast, regimes characterized by leaders overstaying their terms, with only rare exceptions, typically persist as autocracies or undergo a transition towards autocracy.

In an environment characterized by uncertainty, the primary strategy for rulers is to maintain the stability of society. The Chinese Communist Party, for example, consistently emphasizes in public statements that ‘**Stability is Everything**’. The underlying logic is clear:

In stark contrast, leaders who attain power through coups confront more formidable initial challenges than those who overstay their terms. While rulers exceeding their terms might incite discontent and unrest, successful tenures unmistakably demonstrate the incumbents’ robust control over power, effectively discouraging both internal dissent and external threats. This, in turn, contributes to the overall stability of the governing structure and society. Consequently, the pressing need to dismantle the old ruling paradigm and establish a new order is markedly diminished in this context.

On the contrary, coup-instated leaders almost always ascend to power amid instability, even if some coups are executed peacefully. They overthrow previous rulers, necessitating the dismantling of at least part of the old ruling framework and the replacement of certain officers and officials. These actions inevitably lead to turbulence and create adversaries for the new rulers. Distributing the benefits of successful coups among supporters poses another challenge, as it is nearly impossible to satisfy every supporter. If grievances, whether from former ruler supporters or the coup-instated leaders’ backers, intensify, the new leaders might resort to purging some of them, further fueling chaos.

Moreover, despite temporarily wielding power, leaders who come to office through coups face enduring challenges. Coups often expose the fractures within a regime, not only galvanizing more adherents to plot subsequent coups but also emboldening external adversaries, including uprisings, revolutions, and civil wars. A comprehensive coup dataset ([Powell & Thyne 2011](#)) spanning from

1950 to 2023 reveals that 97 countries experienced coups during this period. Among them, 15 countries endured at least 10 coups, and 10 countries witnessed more than 6 successful coups. These factors collectively contribute to a decrease in the expected lifespan of the regime after coups ([Dahl & Gleditsch 2023](#)).

Hypothesis: Political leaders who successfully extend their time in power are more likely to have prolonged survival compared to leaders who assume power through coups.

4 Method and data

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