

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

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Abstract

This paper delves into the duration of political leaders' tenures, focusing on two specific categories: leaders who come into power through coups and those who exceed their designated term limits. It argues that the length of political leadership tenures is not solely determined by their governing strategies but also by the means through which they ascend to power. By employing a survival model, this study demonstrates that leaders entering through coups generally have shorter tenures compared to those who surpass their term limits. The primary objective of this research is to determine, on average, the extended survival duration of overstaying leaders in power in comparison to coup-entry leaders, aiming to uncover the underlying factors contributing to these divergent tenures.

Keywords: Political survival, Coups, Overstays

1 Introduction

The query of what drives certain leaders to endure in power for decades, in stark contrast to others whose leadership abruptly ends within short spans of time, has been a focal point of political science. This compelling inquiry has garnered extensive attention and analysis across various scholarly works, as elaborated upon in Chapter 2.

Previous research on the survival of political leaders shows two noteworthy gaps. Firstly, scholars have predominantly focused on generalized frameworks, which either encompass all types of regimes or include all forms of autocracies. However, the survival dynamics significantly differ not just between democracies and autocracies but also among various types of autocratic rule. Secondly, existing studies have primarily centered on analyzing the likelihood of events causing irregular leader exits, such as coups, occurring within a country-year and the factors influencing these events. However, there remains a dearth of discussion concerning the average duration of survival, whether longer or shorter, for specific types of leaders compared to others.

This paper delves into a comparative analysis between two distinct categories of political leaders: those who ascend to power through coups and those who extend their designated term limits. Existing research has consistently shown that the duration of political leaders' tenures can be profoundly influenced by unforeseen occurrences such as coups. Paradoxically, these unexpected events that usher in new leaders can subsequently become determinants for further unforeseen developments. It's plausible that leaders who assume power through regular and constitutional transitions are more prone to periodic shifts in leadership, while those seizing power through unconstitutional means face higher risks of unanticipated removal from office.

I propose that the means by which political leaders acquire power significantly impacts the duration of their leadership. The examination of irregular-entry or overstaying leaders' tenures holds particular significance for two reasons. Firstly, the tenures of irregular-entry leaders exhibit substantial variability compared to those of regular-entry leaders, ranging from brief periods to several decades. Secondly, forecasting the tenures of irregular-entry leaders presents a challenge. A seemingly robust and stable regime might unexpectedly collapse overnight, while an apparently fragile one might endure for decades.

Employing a survival model, I provide empirical evidence suggesting that leaders who surpass their term limits generally enjoy longer tenures compared to those entering through coups. Coup-entry leaders, in contrast to overstaying leaders, grapple with more significant challenges related to legitimacy, uncertainty, instability, and power-sharing. These factors potentially curtail the duration of survival for coup-entry leaders.

This study could offer contributions on two fronts. Firstly, it underscores that the duration of survival and unforeseen exits isn't solely determined by leaders' actions post-assuming power but is inherently influenced by their method of ascension to power. Secondly, it provides empirical measurements for comparing the tenure duration of different types of leaders.

After the introduction, 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. 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 seminal work, [Bueno de Mesquita et al. \(2003\)](#) conducted a comprehensive examination of leaders spanning diverse political landscapes, encompassing democracies and autocracies, as well as parliamentary and presidential systems, while accounting for both civilian and military contexts. Their aim was to provide an general explanation for the dynamics of political leadership survival within a universal framework. However, it's crucial to recognize that the dynamics of leadership survival differ significantly across various regime types.

Within democratic systems, distinctions arise between parliamentary and presidential regimes.

For example, in parliamentary countries like the UK and Japan, political parties may retain power for extended periods despite frequent changes in prime ministership. An instance of this occurred in the United Kingdom in 2022, witnessing three different prime ministers while the Conservative Party remained in power. Conversely, in presidential countries such as the United States, leaders serve fixed terms, resulting in more regular and predictable power transitions. The spectrum of autocratic regimes is even more diverse, each characterized by distinct features, including civilian autocracy, personnel autocracy, military regimes, party dominance, and monarchies. Some regimes strictly adhere to periodic power transitions, as seen in autocratic Mexico from 1919 to 2000, where each president served a fixed six-year term without facing overthrows or overstays (Perfetti, 2021). Additionally, there are instances where dictators rule indefinitely, passing power to their sons, such as in Syria and North Korea, or to brothers, as observed in Cuba. However, there are also numerous cases where rulers are ousted unexpectedly.

Furthermore, the division of residents into different coalitions or groups may not hold as much relevance in democracies when compared to autocracies. In democratic systems, while those who support and vote for incumbents may witness their advocated policies enacted, those opposing them still experience the same policies. For instance, if a candidate advocating for lower taxes wins an election, it doesn't lead to lower taxes for the candidate's supporters and higher taxes for their opponents; both groups encounter identical tax levels. This dynamic differs significantly in autocratic regimes, where distinct groups benefit unequally based on their status and relationships with the rulers.

Moreover, the rules governing power transitions differ drastically between democracies and autocracies. In most autocratic regimes, the process of leadership selection remains shrouded in secrecy. 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. Due to the lack of transparent and fair conventional procedures for power transitions, it's challenging to assess who holds more power or has more supporters. A dictator could potentially survive a lengthy tenure despite weak support because the true balance of power remains undisclosed.

Conversely, a powerful ruler could be ousted by a small number of guards because the army or other supporters hesitate to fight for them due to a lack of information regarding their predominant status in the power balance. Thus, accurately calculating selectorates or coalitions, as [Bueno de Mesquita et al. \(2003\)](#) did in their research, becomes impossible in such scenarios. In contrast, in democracies, challengers can openly vie for leadership without fear. Their support rates are easily discernible, and they can seek to gain more supporters through public speeches, TV or newspaper advertisements, or assemblies. If their support rates are not adequate to challenge the incumbents, different groups can try to collaborate, facilitating power transitions with a slightly higher level of support.

Given the distinct nature of political leadership survival in various regimes, scholars have increasingly focused on understanding the survival dynamics specific to certain regime types, such as democracies ([Svolik 2014](#)) and autocracies ([Davenport et al. 2021](#)). Notably, considerable academic attention has been drawn towards unexpected tenures, particularly those leaders who either fail to complete their original terms or overstay their terms. Scholars have predominantly revolved around two primary dimensions. The first dimension encompasses contextual conditions and resources available to leaders. These factors include elements such as the leaders' personal competence ([Yu & Jong-A-Pin 2016](#)), societal stability ([Arriola 2009](#)), economic development level ([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 implemented by leaders in enacting their political and economic policies. This includes their responses to challengers and dissent within their regimes ([Escribà-Folch 2013](#), [Davenport et al. 2021](#)), as well as strategies used in policy-making ([Gandhi & Przeworski 2007](#), [Morrison 2009](#)).

Unsurprisingly, a considerable focus in previous studies has been directed towards coups, given their status as a prominent pathway leading to the exit of authoritarian leaders ([Svolik 2008](#), [Frantz & Stein 2016](#)). Literature on leadership survival has examined strategies aimed at preventing coups ([Powell 2017](#), [Sudduth 2017a](#), [De Bruin 2020](#)), as well as analyses of how leaders extend their tenures post-surviving failed coup attempts ([Easton & Siverson 2018](#)). For instance,

Sudduth (2017b), while primarily focused on purge strategies, examines the post-coup actions of a dictator. The central argument suggests that leaders ascending through coups experience a temporary surge in influence compared to elites immediately following the coups, making them less prone to subsequent ousting by coup attempts. This argument challenges the traditional notion that new leaders are generally in a weak position at the start of their tenure (Roessler 2011). Despite this distinction, both Sudduth and prior scholars concur that new leaders tend to purge rival elite groups to consolidate their power. However, Sudduth argues that dictators undertake purges when they can do so without significant risk, while traditional views suggest purges occur when dictators perceive imminent threats. However, it's imperative to acknowledge that new leaders, particularly those ascending through unconventional means, don't adhere to a universal pattern of inherent weakness or strength. Leadership transitions unfold in varied contexts, presenting leaders with diverse challenges.

Scholars have extensively scrutinized the resilience of political leaders across diverse realms, encompassing universal frameworks, autocratic regimes, and the aftermath of failed challenges, such as coup attempts. Interestingly, there has been limited discourse concerning the survival dynamics of leaders who manage to maintain power following successful coups or prolonged incumbency. This study endeavors to bridge this gap by specifically scrutinizing and delineating the survival duration between these two categories of 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 revolves around the equilibrium of power. In autocracies, governance typically rests with a minority faction that possesses a highly structured organization, distinctly contrasting with the decentralized and disorganized subjects. Even amid protests or uprisings, ruling groups adeptly suppress such incidents individually. The possibility of overthrowing tyranny arises if the subjects can coalesce their efforts. However, the principal obstacle lies in the formidable challenge of surmounting the collective action problem. Autocratic dictators commonly adopt a ruling strategy focused on preventing unity among subjects and complicating endeavors to address collective action issues. This elucidates why dictatorships curtail free expression, assembly, and association. The absence of free public expression and association renders the power balance unclear. Consequently, rulers maintain relative power advantages over not only the elites but also the subjects.

The trifecta of illegitimacy, uncertainty, and the equilibrium of power profoundly impact the longevity of a regime. Yet, compared to leaders who gain power through coups, those who over-

stay 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

As previously discussed, both leaders who assume power through coups and those who extend their terms contribute to uncertainties within their regimes. However, regimes led by overstaying rulers generally demonstrate lesser overall uncertainty.

Primarily, following coups, regimes face uncertainty regarding four potential outcomes: democracies initially overthrown by coups may either persist as democracies (I) or transition into autocracies (II), while autocracies overthrown by coups may either endure as autocracies (III) or evolve into democracies (IV). In contrast, regimes with leaders overstaying their terms, with only rare exceptions, typically persist as autocracies.

Secondly, the anticipated duration of future ruling tenures tends to be longer for overstaying rulers than for coup-entry leaders. Most overstaying leaders endeavor to prolong their tenures for as long as possible. For example, figures like Putin in Russia and Xi Jinping in China are less inclined to voluntarily step down unless forcibly removed from power. Conversely, coup-entry leaders face greater uncertainty. Coups are often justified through diverse excuses or claims. Some assert their actions as defending 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. The complexity arises when certain coup leaders honor their promises by transferring power to a constitutional successor. For instance, following 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 ([Ginsburg & Elkins 2019](#)). However, numerous others refuse to step down and retain power, as observed in the 1973 coup in Chile ([Ökten & Balci 2022](#)).

Thirdly, uncertainties abound regarding policy changes and power reshuffling. Comparatively, coup-entry leaders need to restructure top officials and justify their actions by implementing noticeable differences after overthrowing the incumbents. In contrast, overstaying leaders face fewer issues as their regimes experience minimal dramatic changes. There is no rush to dismantle the old ruling paradigm and establish a new order.

3.3 Equilibrium of power

Rulers in autocracies face a challenging dilemma in managing powerful elites. They require a strong force to counter potential external threats while constantly grappling with the fear of being replaced by competent and ambitious subordinates. Therefore, maintaining a delicate balance of power becomes a sophisticated skill. It's apparent that sustaining equilibrium is easier than

restoring it once disrupted.

In regimes with leaders overstaying their terms, there exists, at least temporarily, a superficial equilibrium of power. Successful overstay demonstrates the incumbents' firm grip on power, effectively deterring both internal dissent and external challenges. Consequently, this contributes to the overall stability of the governing structure and society.

Conversely, leaders who come to power through coups invariably disrupt the balance of power and must establish a new equilibrium, even in relatively peaceful coup scenarios. The overthrow of previous rulers necessitates the dismantling of the existing ruling framework and a reshuffling of top officers and officials. These actions inevitably breed turbulence and adversaries for the new rulers, making the restoration of order and the balance of power considerably more challenging.

Internal conflicts among elites, as highlighted by numerous scholars, pose a significant threat to the stability of those in power. Hence, they are often compelled to negotiate and compromise among external factions. As noted by [Roessler \(2011\)](#), these rulers might attempt to reduce the likelihood of subsequent coups, albeit at the expense of increasing the risk of societal rebellions and civil wars. This strategy resonates with the approach adopted by Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s. He pursued a strategy of compromise with both Japan and the Soviet Union to eliminate the internal threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party, prioritizing "Domestic stability takes precedence over resisting foreign invasion" during that period ([Chu 1999](#)). However, adopting a hardline stance internally could not only weaken themselves by purging elites, but also incite backlash from close allies, as witnessed in instances like Idi Amin's coup in 1971 in Uganda and Pervez Musharraf's coup in 1999 in Pakistan ([Sudduth 2017b](#)).

These factors collectively contribute to a shorter expected lifespan of regimes following coups ([Dahl & Gleditsch 2023](#)), compared to relatively longer tenures for overstaying regimes. Analyzing a comprehensive coup dataset ([Powell & Thyne 2011](#)) spanning from 1950 to 2023, it's evident 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, reinforcing the analysis discussed above. Based on these insights, I propose the following hypothesis:

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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