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Democracy Dies in Darkness

POSTEVERYTHING

No, Trump is not attempting a 'coup.' Here's why the distinction matters.

It's important that we describe the crisis accurately. That will shape our response.

Perspective by Erica De Bruin

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President Trump refuses to accept the results of last week's election, in which he lost to the Democratic challenger Joe Biden, and prominent Republican officials in Congress and across the nation are backing him. Some commentators have settled on a shorthand description for what's going on: "The current president of the United States, Donald Trump, is attempting a coup in plain sight," as Vox's Ezra Klein put it.

But while the steps Trump and other Republicans officials have taken to discredit the results of the election are enormously damaging, they do not constitute a coup. This is not merely a semantic or academic distinction — still less an admonition for anyone to relax their guard in the face of serious violations of democratic norms. Rather, an accurate assessment of whether the United States is in the midst of a coup matters because the tactics that work to prevent successful coups are different from those needed to prevent other forms of authoritarian power grabs.

Under the standard definition in political science, a coup attempt involves an illegal, overt effort by civilian or military elites to remove a sitting executive from power. Some coups involve battles between rival factions, but, as the security-studies scholar Naunihal Singh has explained, in most cases, military officials — whether rivals or allies — prioritize acting together to avoid a civil war within the military, even if it means their preferred side does not prevail. While most coup attempts are therefore carried out with very little bloodshed, the threat of violence underlies all coups. It is that threat that distinguishes coups from voluntary resignations and other peaceful transfers of power.

Because coups involve the threat of violence, they are difficult to carry out without the backing of the most powerful coercive institution of the state — which explains why the vast majority of coup attempts involve the regular military.

While deeply corrosive to public trust in our political institutions, the steps Trump has taken to remain in power do not yet fit that definition. He has falsely disparaged the election as beset by fraud, and mounted legal challenges to contest the integrity of ballots in some states. And he has powerful allies: Several prominent Republican officials, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, have backed Trump's refusal to concede. Attorney General William P. Barr authorized federal prosecutors to investigate "vote tabulation irregularities," giving credence to Trump's false claims of electoral fraud (and leading a top Justice Department election-law official to step down). Most recently, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo remarked there would be "a smooth transition to a second Trump administration," although the context seemed to indicate it was a poor attempt at a joke rather than an announcement of plans.

What does this amount to? Because Trump is attempting to remain in power, rather than remove someone else from it his efforts come closer to what scholars call an attempt at a "self-coup" — or, using the Spanish term, an *autogolpe* — in which a head of state attempts to remain in power past his or her term in office.

But when you look at other self-coups, the limited nature of Trump's actions (so far) becomes apparent. As one analysis of *autogolpes* in Peru, Guatemala, and Russia puts it, they involved situations in which "a president closes the courts and the legislature, suspends the constitution, and rules by decree until a referendum and new legislative elections are held to approve broader political powers." They also, as a rule, require the approval of the armed forces.

None of that is happening here. Crucially, the steps Trump and other Republican officials have taken thus far do not involve the threat of violence. It is true Trump's time in office has coincided with a longer-running increase in the politicization of the military. Trump himself has made partisan remarks to military audiences, intervened in military justice proceedings and repeatedly referred to officers as political allies — all of which many military observers find disturbing. His firing of Secretary of Defense Mike Esper is disconcerting, as is the elevation of Trump loyalists at the Department of Defense.

Yet whatever the palace intrigue among the political leadership at the Pentagon, the core question concerns the position of the military itself — brass and rank and file alike. It remains highly unlikely that officers would go along with an overt attempt to prevent President-elect Joe Biden from assuming power in January. The U.S. military is not filled with Trump loyalists — and troops are more diverse in their political leanings than often thought. In written responses to questions from House lawmakers released over the summer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff emphasized "in the event of a dispute over some aspect of the elections, by law, U.S. courts and the U.S. Congress are required to resolve any disputes, not the U.S. military."

Members of other security forces, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement, appear to hold more favorable views of Trump than military personnel. And the proliferation of armed right-wing groups in the United States raised concerns before Election Day about the role they might play. But coups are difficult to stage without backing from the regular military — which, in addition to its firepower (no amateur militant group could stand up to the U.S. Army), can make a more credible claim that it defends the national interest.

Stretching the concept of a coup to encompass actions that do not constitute illegal, overt attempts to unseat an executive, backed by the threat of force, runs the risk of impeding our understanding of how to address the threats we *do* face.

Importantly, the factors that have historically led political parties to abandon their commitments to democracy — as top officials in the Republican Party increasingly appear to be doing — are distinct from the factors that are associated with coups. Republicans are violating the norms we rely on to ensure peaceful transfers of power, undermining trust in our electoral process and conveying to their supporters the poisonous notion that Democrats, as a rule, can never win power legitimately. This is textbook "democratic backsliding."

It is true that political polarization and inequality can provide conditions ripe for both democratic backsliding and coups. But whether coup attempts occur depends on the willingness of the military to intervene. As a result, the tactics that work to stop coups tend to do so by changing the incentives facing military officers. To prevent democratic backsliding, the bigger threat to the survival of democratic institutions in the United States, the focus should be on putting public pressure on civilian elites within the Republican Party to veer from their present reckless course.

The real damage to American democracy underway may be more mundane than a coup, but in the long run has the potential to be just as dangerous. The most likely outcome to this election is that Trump leaves office as scheduled. But the erosion of democratic norms will have eroded the quality of our democracy — and the damage will persist long after he departs.