

Power Dynamics and Autocoup Attempts

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Abstract

This study investigates the determinants of autocoup attempts, with the aim of enhancing our understanding of the political dynamics underpinning extra-constitutional tenure extensions by incumbent leaders. Addressing a notable lacuna in the existing literature, it argues that the balance of power is a critical factor shaping the likelihood of such events. In contrast to classical coups—which often emerge from fragmented or unstable power structures—autocoups typically occur in contexts characterised by stable yet highly concentrated authority. To render the concept of power balance empirically observable, regime type is employed as a proxy, capturing the structural distribution of power between incumbents and institutional constraints or elite challengers. Drawing on a bias-reduced logistic regression model, the analysis finds regime type to be a statistically significant predictor of autocoup attempts. Specifically, leaders governing within presidential democracies and personalist autocracies are significantly more likely to engage in tenure-extending autocoups than those in dominant-party regimes. The study contributes to the conceptual refinement of autocoups and introduces a novel dataset, which may serve as a foundation for future empirical research. Furthermore, it offers a more systematic and empirically grounded account of irregular leadership transitions, broadening the analytical scope from irregular removal to irregular tenure extension. Finally, the findings underscore the critical role of regime type in shaping the strategic calculus of incumbents contemplating an autocoup.

Keywords: Autocoups, Coup, Regime types, Tenure Extension, Authoritarianism