

# Let Us Now Praise Coups

OXFORD, England The government of Zimbabwe recently ordered foreign aid groups to [halt their operations](#) within its borders, thereby blocking the food aid that the United Nations funnels through such organizations from getting to the country's starving people. Last month, the government of Burma [issued a similar ban](#). Of course, when we say "the government of Zimbabwe," what we really mean is [President Robert Mugabe](#), just as "the government of Burma" these days means [Senior Gen. Than Shwe](#), the leader of the ruling junta. In justifying the bans, each ruler harrumphed that outsiders should not be allowed to tell his nation what to do. But the real obstacle blocking international food aid is not the principle of national sovereignty; it is the insistence of dictators on being left to call their own shots. Mugabe decided that his citizens were better dead than fed; his nation had no part in the decision.

This murderous outrage reminds us of a central problem in trying to help ease the misery of the developing world, especially the "bottom billion" inhabitants of countries being left behind by global prosperity: Leaders in such sad little states as Zimbabwe and Burma are quite ridiculously powerful. They have turned parliament, the news media and the judiciary into mere implementers of their strangling systems of control. But the extraordinary lack of external restraints on these dictators is poorly

understood.

Many people are still trapped in a politically correct mindset that sees a strong rich world bullying a weak poor world. The disastrous U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 played straight into this mentality of seeing wealthy countries as bullies. Yet the planet's key power imbalance is not between rich and poor; it is between confident, open governments willing to pool sovereignty to help their publics and crabbed, defensive governments determined not to give up a scrap of sovereignty. The former produce prosperity; the latter manufacture misery.

Compare the powers of Germany's government to those of Zimbabwe's. The German economy is around 400 times larger than the Zimbabwean. But it is the Zimbabwean government, not the German, that has independent monetary, fiscal, trade and migration policies, an independent currency and courts from which one cannot file international appeals. Like virtually all rich countries, Germany has learned that there are real advantages to limiting its own sovereignty and pooling it with neighbors and allies. But the governments of failing states such as Zimbabwe and Burma have refused to share any sovereignty with anyone. And remember, in these countries, "government" means the president or other head of state: Mugabe and Shwe have powers that eclipse those of President Bush, let alone those of German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

So how can the grossly excessive powers of the Mugabes and Shwes of the world be curtailed? After Iraq, there is no international appetite for using the threat of military force to pressure thugs. But only military pressure is likely to be effective; tyrants can almost always shield themselves from economic sanctions. So there is only one credible counter to dictatorial power: the country's own army.

Realistically, Mugabe and Shwe can be toppled only by a military coup. Of course, they are fully aware of this danger, and thus have appointed their cronies as generals and kept a watchful eye on any potentially restless junior officers. Such tactics reduce the risk of a coup, but they cannot eliminate it: On average, there have been two successful coups per year in the developing world in recent decades. A truly bad government in a developing country is more likely to be replaced by a coup than by an election: Mugabe will presumably rig the runoff vote scheduled for Friday by intimidation. Or he could follow the example of the last Burmese dictator, who held an election, lost and simply ignored the result.

I find it a little awkward to be writing in praise, however faint, of coups. They are unguided missiles, as likely to topple a democracy as a dictatorship. But there is still something to be said for them.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the international community has taken the rather simplistic position that

armies should stay out of politics. That view is understandable but premature. Rather than trying to freeze coups out of the international system, we should try to provide them with a guidance system. In contexts such as Zimbabwe and Burma, coups should be encouraged because they are likely to lead to improved governance. (It's hard to imagine things getting much worse.) The question then becomes how to provide encouragement for some potentially helpful coups while staying within the bounds of proper international conduct.

In fact, some basic principles are not that hard to draw. For starters, governments that have crossed the red line of banning U.N. food aid -- a ghastly breach of any basic contract between the governors and the governed -- should temporarily lose international recognition of their legitimacy. Ideally, such moves should come from the United Nations itself; surely banning U.N. help constitutes a breach of rudimentary global obligations. But realistically, other dictators, worried that they might wind up in the same boat, would rally to block action at the United Nations, so we must look elsewhere.

Which brings us to the obvious locus of international action: Europe. The European Union has a long tradition of setting minimum standards of political decency for its members, who must protect their minorities and defend basic rights. A collective E.U. withdrawal of recognition from the Mugabe or Shwe regimes would be an obvious and modest extension of the values that underpin the

European project. Making any such suspension of recognition temporary -- say, for three months -- would present potential coup plotters within an army with a brief window of legitimacy. They would know that it was now or never, which could spur them to act. And even if the loss of recognition did not induce a quick coup, E.U. recognition would be restored after the three months were up. This would spare the world the gradual accumulation of a club of unrecognized regimes, something both problematic and unrealistic.

The scope of the torment in Burma and Zimbabwe should be more than enough of a goad to action. We need to move away from impotent political protest, but we must also face the severe limitations on our own power. The real might lies with a dictator's own forces of repression. Our best hope -- and the best hope of suffering citizens -- is to turn those very forces against the men they now protect.

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