Research: Underlying Factors of Coup d’état

Taehun Kim

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When we think about the transition or transfer of power in democratic countries, we often assume that the legitimacy of authority is handed over peacefully through electoral and civil process to a new leadership. Violent overthrow or forceful mobilization of government seems like a rare even that occurred mostly in the past. However, coup d’état – “stroke of state” or “blow of state” – takes place much more frequently around the world than people expect. Coup d’état is a man-made phenomenon, and it can be dissected in order to see which causes lead to such an event.

In this research, three potential determinants that may play a role in increasing the likelihood of coup d’état occurring have been established as Economic, geo-political, and social factors. In this research, twenty-four countries (Argentina, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Haiti, Honduras, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritania, Nigeria, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Surinam, Syria, Thailand, Togo, Venezuela) with most successful coups have been compared with eleven countries (Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, United State of America, Malaysia, Luxembourg, Kenya, Italy, Cameroon, Sri Lanka) that never experienced a successful coup.

Coup d’état, like the literal translation suggests, is a stroke of state meaning that it isa detrimental event for a country and its citizens. Depending on how it is carried out, countless lives could be lost, infrastructures damaged, and what were considered norms of a country can all changed in a short period of time. Take Afghanistan as an example. On September 7, 2021, the Taliban – a Sunni extremist movement that ruled most of Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001 – overthrew the U.S. backed Afghan national government by force and announced itself as the “caretaker government” to rule Afghanistan. After the new installation of the Taliban government, immediate consequences took place. The original police departments and officers have been replaced with Taliban fighters that were willing to enforce the Taliban way of life. Women are no longer allowed to attend secondary schools, hold positions of authority in politics, and wear what they wish to wear. What could have led to this event? One underlying factor may come from the nation’s demographics.

If there were two countries, one with a very uniform population and the other with very fractionalized population, which country would be more stable? It is fair to say that a country with uniform population would most likely be more stable. It is because if the population of a country has a strong sense of nationalism and identify themselves as people who share similar culture, religion, language, there may arise less problems compared to a fractionalized nation. According to the research, countries with most coups, on average, had a higher ethnic, linguistic, and religious fractionalization scores compared to those with no coups. The average ethnic fractionalization score, linguistic fractionalization score, religious fractionalization score of countries with most coups were 0.6, 0.5, 0.4 while countries with no coups had 0.14, 0.15, 0.4 respectively. Besides religious fractionalization score, there were significant differences in linguistic and ethnic fractionalization. This data reinforces the claim above that if a country is highly fractionalized, it is more likely to be unstable due to its populations lack of uniformity. Overwhelming number of countries that had the highest fractionalization scores and experienced most coups were part of Africa and countries with no coups were in Asia. A movement or a revolution can be contagious as we have seen throughout the history especially in a destabilized region. Take the American Revolution against Great Britain as an example. Its success in 1776 seemed to have inspired the French to seek its own independence. And few years later, revolution in Germany, then Austria, then Poland, then Russia, and Italy surged. Just like this example, coups may also show that it is contagious. The overwhelming number of coups occurring in African countries is too significant to say it’s a coincidence. A country in Africa and its neighbors constantly experiencing coups may play a role in destabilizing not just one country, but the whole region.

Another trait that countries with most coups have in common can be seen in their economies. According to the research, out of the twenty-four countries with most coups, the average number of negative annual GDP growth from 1961 to 2021 were twelve compared to just five among countries with no coups. A country with highest negative annual GDP growth counts was Argentina (24 counts) followed Chad (19 counts) compared to Japan and Cameroon which experienced 8 and 10 counts. by This indicates that countries with more coups had weaker economies compared to their counterparts. Other key economic factors that show the correlation between coup frequencies and the strength of the economy are unemployment rate, inflation, Purchasing Power Parity, and GDP Per Capita. Average unemployment rate was 8% among countries with highest coup counts compared to 5% among countries no coups with highest unemployment rate of 30% in Lesotho during 1991 to 2021. Observing the inflation rates data, there was an undeniably strong correlation between high inflation rates and countries with most coups. The average inflation rate of countries with the highest coups from 1960 to 2021 was 52 percent compared to just 4.2 percent in countries with no coups. Hyperinflation is usually caused by a sudden growth in the money supply causing the price levels to be uncontrollably unstable. Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), similar to inflation rate in that it shows the strength of a country’s currency, is the “rate of currency conversion that equalize the purchasing power of different currencies by eliminating the difference in price levels between countries.” PPP conversion factor, GDP (LCU per international US dollar, has been used in the research. Just like inflation, there was a clear correlation between PPP and the frequencies of coups. The average PPP twenty-four countries with most coups was 206 while it was just 40 for the countries with no coups. This means that on average, the rate at which a currency of a country with most coups would have to be converted into that of another country to buy the same amount of goods and services is 205%. The inflation rate and the PPP indicates just how volatile the currencies of countries with most coups are. The last economic indicator used to study the underlying factors in coups was GDP per capita. Gross Domestic Product per capital shows a country’s GDP divided by its total population meaning it’s an average GDP that everyone creates. Among the twenty-four countries with most successful coups, the average GDP per capita from 1960 to 2021 was 1,540.71 USD compared to 16,682.50 USD. There is an undeniable correlation between these two values in that the countries with no coups on average had ten times the amount of GDP per capita that those countries with highest coups.

It is clear and evident looking by looking mentioned geo-political and economic metrics that countries with highest political instability (high coups) also have higher social unrest from strong fractionalization in their populations and weaker economies and currencies.

Besides geo-political and economic data, Internet connectivity, and intentional homicides have been observed and they too have revealed strong correlations. In our world today, internet is an essential part of communication. Because of internet, we are ever more connected to what is going on and with the opinions of hundreds of thousands of minds. However, this is only true in countries with high internet connectivity. According to the World Bank data, the percentage of the population connected to the internet from 1990 to 2022, on average for the 24 countries with most coups was just 11% compared to 36% in countries with no coups. If we think about the benefits of internet, the biggest benefit it brought is the sharing of ideas from millions of people: expansive reachability of ideas. Whether every agrees with an opinion on the web or not, we are exposed to diverse ideas and news from different outlets. People who have access to internet are more aware of what is going on around the world and in their communities. Through mainstream media internet, people can gather with similar minded people and keep growing, increasing their voice about a certain topic. If there is a protest, one can create an event immediately reach millions of people while without internet, it takes time and more effort to do so. Coup is a forceful overthrow of a government so there is nothing democratic about the process. In a country with low internet connectivity and harder communication methods, it may be hard to oppose such movements such as coups by grouping up with many other opposers. A perpetrator of a successful coup will most likely be a large group with significant influence and they will face little to no backlash by its population in their countries if they are not connected to the internet in the first place. Even if there is a group of opposers that voice opposition of the new government or regime or the act of coup itself, their voices will most likely be buried under the state-controlled news and propaganda. This may indicate why among certain countries such as one among the twenty-four countries keep on experiencing coups.

Lastly, the intentional homicide rate (per hundred thousand people) indicates the level of social security and the judiciary power and control a nation has in its citizens. Among the twenty-four countries with most coups, there were on average, 12 homicides per hundred thousand people compared to just 2 in countries with no coups from 1960 to 2021. Whether the problems stem from a weak judicial system or lack of law enforcing, it is fair to say that higher homicides result in a more unstable society. If the foundation and the center of a country, the national government or ruling body, is overthrown frequently by another, it can be assumed that the judicial system and law enforcement would be weak, and military may be fractionalized as a tool to overthrow internal institutions.

In conclusion, through looking at geo-political, economic, and data such as internet connectivity and homicide rates, the research indicated that countries with most coup counts were not just unstable politically, but unstable in almost every single aspect. These countries were poorer, less connected to the rest of the world, had very weak and unstable currencies, and were very divided internally ethnically and linguistically divided (low level of nationalism). The

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