

# Authoritarianism & coups & autocoups in democracies

Professor Victor Menaldo  
University of Washington  
UW Political Economy Forum

# What do we know about dictatorships?

A lot, it turns out. They differ from democracies. They are usually characterized by irregular transfers of power between rulers. Smaller groups have greater political influence and power. A dictator's supporters are wracked by rampant uncertainty about his intentions and, vice-versa, the dictator tends to mistrust the organizations that launch him into power, which invariably include the military (for what's it's worth, 99 percent of autocrats have been male). While most dictators don't last in office all that long, many face prison, death, or exile after leaving power. This makes the stakes of controlling the state quite high. More often than not, this leads dictators to engage in short-run calculations to survive in office.

# How do dictators achieve power?

Dictators are usually launched into power through coups—there are too many to identify—revolutions, including the Cuban, Iranian, Mexican, Russian, French, and Arab Spring revolts, civil wars, such as how the Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua, and foreign interventions, such as when the Soviets invaded Poland and Hungary.

# What is a coup?

A coup is a swift and irregular transfer of power from one executive to another where either force or the threat of force is used to install the new leader into office. It implies that the perpetrator has the support of the armed forces or powerful factions within the military.

# When do coups happen in democracies?

While coups are the most typical manner historically in which one dictator succeeds another—rigged elections, revolutions, and civil wars are next in terms of frequency, *seriatim*—it is rare to observe a coup displacing a freely and fairly elected government where citizens are fully enfranchised. The few prominent examples include Spain in 1923, Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, Brazil in 1964, Greece in 1967, Chile in 1973, Pakistan in 1999, and Thailand in 2006. Three of those cases involved the CIA. If we stretch the definition of democracy, coups felled “elected governments” in Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Peru, and Turkey during the Cold War. If we really stretch the definition, we might also include episodes in countries where the military was the strongest political actor and elections were somewhat of a joke: Bolivia, Burma, Burundi, Comoros, Cuba, Ecuador, Ghana, Honduras, South Korea, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Suriname, and Uganda.

# How do autocoups occur?

Autocoups occur when a duly elected executive suspends the legislature and judiciary or withdraws civil liberties and otherwise violates the constitution—sometimes with the intent of protracting their rule. But the number of autocoups that have occurred in democracies again place us in the land of very few data points: Hitler in 1933, Uruguay in 1972, Peru in 1992 (and some argue, again in 2019), Turkey in 2015, Hungary this year, Bolivia before Morales was exiled to Mexico last year, and Maduro in Venezuela over the last few years. If we again stretch the definition of democracy we might include episodes on Pakistan, Panama, The Philippines, and Sri Lanka. The key to successful autocoups? An executive opportunistically declares a state of emergency and then uses extraordinary powers to arrogate more authority, the way Viktor Orban did in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

# What usually happens after a coup?

Especially after a coup, an ambitious politician can rally landowners or miners or industrialists to help kick the rascals out and replace them with a new one who may be more reliable: themselves. In most dictatorships, business is in bed with politicians and beholden to them. Consider Germany's industrialization under Bismarck, "corporatist" experiments in Italy, Spain, and Portugal under Fascism in the aftermath of the Great Depression, Mexico under Porfirio Díaz, and then again under the PRI regime during the 20th Century, Argentina under Juan Perón, and contemporary examples from the developing world that include China, Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Venezuela. One key to holding power is to politicize property rights and create and regulate markets to generate rents, perhaps by imposing barriers to entry, which can be shared with supporters and help finance the state. A majority of dictators nonetheless command regimes with democratic like institutions—remarkably, despite institutionalized corruption and impunity, they often boast constitutions, legislatures, courts, political parties, and elections.