
 PART ONE

FROM SOLDIERS TO POLITICIANS

Don't let the facts disturb the theory.

—Unknown

No argument of mine has generated as much controversy as the one developed in the book you're holding in your hands. My hypothesis is simple: Sometimes democracy is established through a military coup.

That statement alone is sufficient to make people shudder. After all, we widely assume that a coup d'état —French for “stroke of the state”—is inherently bad for democracy. At first blush, you may dismiss the concept as an oxymoron. You may find yourself agreeing with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, who lashed out against me in a public speech. There is “no such thing as a democratic coup d'état,” he argued and compared the concept to the “living dead,” calling it a figment of my imagination.¹ You may also worry that you are about to read an advocacy of human rights abuses by military leaders, a how-to guide for legitimizing coups, or a celebration of CIA-backed attempts to topple unfriendly regimes in foreign countries.

But that's not what this book is about. Instead the book attempts to answer a set of seemingly simple questions that popped into my head as I sat in my apartment in Chicago in early 2011 watching the Arab Spring unfold. In Egypt the military had just seized power from the authoritarian government of Hosni Mubarak and promised democratic elections. Although Egypt's democratic transition later took a turn for the worse, the military coup enabled the first ever democratic elections in a country that has been around since before Christ. In Tunisia the military enabled a democratic transition by refusing orders from the dictatorship to use force on its rebellious population. On some accounts, it was Rachid Ammar, chief of staff of the Tunisian Armed Forces, who said “Tu est fini” (You are finished) to the Tunisian dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and sent him running to Saudi Arabia for refuge.²

As my television set unveiled these events in bright colors and mass confusion, I began to ponder: Why do we assume that militaries inherently pose a problem to democracy? Can a military coup serve the counterintuitive function of toppling a dictator and establishing the foundations of democratic rule? Over the ensuing six years I devoured innumerable historical and contemporary sources, trekked to Egypt and Turkey for interviews and research, and wrote articles in search of answers to these questions. That search culminated in this book.

I first coined the term *democratic coup d'état* in an article published in 2012 in the *Harvard International Law Journal*. The article received considerable praise and criticism, and the term became an integral part of the nomenclature in law and political science. It was widely cited—both positively and not so positively—in the academic literature and assigned to courses in law schools and graduate schools. The article made headlines across the globe in major media outlets.

Despite the waves it generated, the 2012 article was only a preview; this book is the feature film. It completely revamps the article and substantially expands on the original treatment I offered. It covers scores of additional case studies and explores the rich nuances and consequences that I could not cover in the article. In addition, the article was written for an exclusively academic audience, whereas I wrote this book for a general audience with intellectual curiosity.

In many ways I am an unlikely author of a book that considers coups with democratic potential. I was born in Istanbul, Turkey, at a time when the nation was under military rule. In 1980, the year before my birth, the Turkish military seized power from a civilian government in a brutal coup. In the ensuing two years, the coup makers disbanded the Parliament, drafted a repressive constitution, and committed widespread human rights abuses. Numerous civilians were forced into exile, jailed, tortured, or executed after receiving trumped-up charges and sham trials. To escape being jailed as communists, my parents burned all of their books that had even a semblance of leftist ideology. Although the military returned power to civilians after two years, the ravages of the coup reverberated for two decades. Having personally witnessed these events, I was, for the majority of my life, quick to condemn all military coups.

Yet the events of the Arab Spring also led me to reflect on an earlier coup in Turkey—a coup of a much different caliber—that my grandparents lived through. In 1960 the Turkish military toppled an authoritarian government and turned power over to democratically elected leaders. Under the

military's supervision, Turkey emerged from an eighteen-month transition process as a genuine, multiparty democracy with a thriving civil society and what is widely accepted as the most liberal constitution in Turkish history.

I began researching whether there were other coups that fit this latter, paradoxical pattern and came across numerous examples that no serious academic can dismiss as measurement errors or extreme outliers. These coups dispute the clean, comfortable narrative that dismisses all military coups as detriments to democratic development. They prove that an event as undemocratic as a military coup can, in some cases, lead to democracy.

I picked a broad set of cases to feature in this book, from different time periods and world regions, to analyze why and how democratic coups happen. The book covers events from the Athenian Navy's stance in 411 BC against a tyrannical home government to military coups in the American colonies against corrupt British governors and to twentieth-century coups that toppled dictators and installed democratic rule in countries as diverse as Guinea-Bissau, Portugal, and Colombia. The stories of these coups are both fascinating and troubling. They involve bargains, conflict, trade-offs, and backstabbing, both literal and metaphorical.

In the following pages I unpack these stories in detail. I try to refrain from telling a single story or creating a grand theory. The chaotic reality of a coup d'état is too rich to be reduced to a one-size-fits-all paradigm that pretends to explain events at the expense of the facts. Although my focus is on the military, I also examine the relevant events from the point of view of those who stand outside it.

You'll find that my approach is neither blind admiration nor blanket condemnation. I bristle when I see the mindless glorification of militaries or military coups, yet I also chafe at blanket dismissals of all militaries and all military coups as unyielding threats to democracy. In the end, my aim is to bring much-needed nuance to the discourse on civil-military relations.

One of the many challenges of writing a book on military coups is the dearth of reliable information about events and actors. I agree with these sentiments of an Egyptian activist: "The military is a black box, and no one knows what happens inside."³ Secrecy only increases during the planning of a coup. Coup makers rarely shout their plans from mountaintops, and the military's decision-making process is notoriously shrouded in secrecy. In putting together the case studies for this book, I relied on a combination of primary sources—news stories, contemporary interviews with relevant actors, official statements, and the like—as well as secondary sources that summarize the relevant events. I also personally conducted interviews in Turkey and

Egypt, two countries featured prominently throughout this book. These discussions were not formal field research but simply an attempt on my part to cut through the noise and get a better grasp of the relevant events on the ground instead of speculating from my comfortable academic chair in the United States. Even the sum total of these sources wasn't sufficient to resolve all ambiguities. But they helped me to comprehend what seemed incomprehensible and place myself in a better position to evaluate the credibility of the sources I used.

Coups are not the domains of idle academics. Although this book is written by a professor, its subject is practically and politically significant because military coups are attempted regularly around the globe. As recently as July 2016, when I was writing this book, factions within the Turkish military staged an ill-fated coup attempt against the incumbent government. (I'll return to this coup in due course.)

The book is ultimately a study of individual behavior and humanity's eternal struggle with power, as it grapples with several baffling questions: Why would militaries that loyally serve a dictatorship turn their arms against the dictator? After seizing power from a dictator, why would imposing generals—armed with tanks and guns and all—voluntarily surrender power to civilian politicians? What distinguishes militaries that help build democracies from those that destroy them?

The book is also a cautionary tale about the risks of blindly accepting comfortable yet demonstrably wrong societal assumptions. It's about the importance, to paraphrase Mark Twain, of pausing and reflecting whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority. It's a story of how our society developed a theory condemning all military coups before analyzing the facts, which, if you know your Sherlock Holmes, is the worst mistake an investigator can make. Once the theory was created, reinforced, and retweeted, it became the truth. And we have refused to let the facts disturb it. As a result, a simple idea supported by hard, historical data—that democracy sometimes comes with a coup—has come to prompt immediate visceral reactions at the expense of human knowledge.

I hope this book will serve as a reminder of the vices of consensus, the urgency of questioning the standard narratives about our world, and the imperative of engaging with all ideas, no matter how controversial.

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