

WHEN AND WHY COUPS OCCUR DURING CIVIL WAR

a One Earth Future Foundation **POLICY BRIEF**



Coups d'état are frequently both causes and consequences of larger-scale civil wars and rebellions. This policy brief outlines the findings published from the first global quantitative study of the relationship between coups and civil wars.

Policy Implications:

- Coup attempts may be less likely to occur when international actors and regional organizations preempt coup attempts by clearly articulating that post-coup governments will not be tolerated. These warnings may be especially important in active conflict zones where leaders face an elevated risk of coup activity. International condemnation of coups may be especially important during civil wars over central control of the government or where rebel fighters are relatively strong.
- Organizations working in conflict zones should be aware of the high risk of regime change via coups d'état and should form contingency plans for how their missions will change should a more or less cooperative leader suddenly take power.
- Conflict negotiations should include specific provisions for the post-war welfare of military elites. Concessions to rebels threaten military elites serving the incumbent government and assurances against future punishment or repression may decrease threat perceptions and the risk of coup attempts.

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Though military coups d'état are less common today than they were during the height of the Cold War, coup continues to be the world's most common form of unconstitutional leader change. Around the world, nearly fifty coups have been attempted since the turn of the century and every populated continent has suffered at least one coup attempt during this period.



Photos of young Khmer Rouge fighters on display at Tuol Sleng Museum, photo by Adam Carr

One overlooked fact about coups is that they are frequently both causes and consequences of larger-scale civil wars and rebellions. In fact, more than one in four coup attempts since World War II occurred in the context of an ongoing civil conflict. Coup attempts in countries as diverse as Uganda, Ethiopia, Peru, and Azerbaijan delayed negotiations between governments and rebel leaders. War-time coups in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Guatemala precipitated genocides.

This policy brief is based on the article “Causes and Outcomes of Coups during Civil War” in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, by Drs. Curtis Bell (One Earth Future) and Jun Koga Sudduth (University of Strathclyde).

RESEARCH SUMMARY

How and under what conditions might civil wars increase the risk of destabilizing coup attempts? This is an important question because coup attempts so frequently derail peace processes, prompt state-sponsored violence, and extend costly civil conflicts. In many cases, lengthy government-rebel negotiations have failed due to sudden, unexpected coups that resulted in regime change. Though half of the countries that have suffered civil war since 1990 have also had coup attempts, previous research has not explained what makes some countries especially prone to war-time coup activity. Bell and Sudduth explore this relationship with a statistical analysis of coups and civil wars that spans 193 countries for the years 1950-2011.

Research on the causes of coup activity emphasizes the important roles played by two factors in a potential coup plotter's decision-making: (1) military dissatisfaction with the government (plotter motivation) and (2) the chances that a coup attempt against the leader might succeed (plotter opportunity). According to this logic, coups occur when motivations and opportunities are great enough to compel military elites to risk a coup attempt against the government. Civil war changes this calculus by increasing military dissatisfaction, both because soldiers suffer the short-term costs of combat and because of the long-term uncertainty over who will win the war and eventually control the government. Rebel victory poses considerable threats to military elites; for these elites are the most likely to be held responsible for war crimes and the least likely to maintain their positions should the rebels win and form a new government. Indeed, the analysis finds ongoing civil war roughly doubles the risk of coup activity.

It follows from this logic that coup attempts become more enticing to military elites as rebel groups gain strength and pose increasingly formidable threats to the governments they fight. The study finds strong support for this implication. Using geospatial data that measures the distance between the capital city and the war zone, Bell and Sudduth show coups become much more likely when fighting approaches the capital. Wars that encompass the capital city are more than twice as likely to prompt coups relative to wars fought in a country's hinterlands. Several measures of rebel military strength also suggest coups are more likely when governments are in greater danger of being overwhelmed by rebel fighters.

Finally, military elites who are threatened by ongoing civil war take greater risks to escape their tenuous positions. The study exposes this risk tolerance by comparing the success rates of war-time and peace-time coup attempts. Even after considering many other factors that determine coup success, the study finds peace-time coups succeed 49% of the time while only 25% of war-time coup attempts succeed. Bell and Sudduth argue the large difference in these success rates can be traced to the dissatisfaction of military elites. The more dissatisfied the coup plotter, the more tolerant that plotter becomes of high-risk coup plots that are relatively unlikely to succeed.



Chechen rebels praying, photo by Mikhail Evstafiev

The leaders of countries engaged in civil wars face concurrent threats from rebels and military elites, and unfortunately there are no simple solutions. Efforts to “coup-proof”---measures including reassigning military elites to different posts, reducing military capacity, or distancing the military from the capital city---may reduce the risk of a coup attempt, though they also decrease the military’s effectiveness in its war against the rebels. Making concessions to rebels may help leaders end wars through negotiation, but these concessions also increase the threats perceived by military elites and raise the risk of a coup attempt. This research is a first step that identifies this paradox. Future work will delineate effective strategies for promoting political stability in the face of simultaneous threats of civil war and coup d’état.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

- *Coup attempts may be less likely to occur when international actors and regional organizations pre-empt coup attempts by clearly articulating that post-coup governments will not be tolerated. These warnings may be especially important in active conflict zones where leaders face an elevated risk of coup activity. International condemnation of coups may be especially important during civil wars over central control of the government or where rebel fighters are relatively strong.*
- *Organizations working in conflict zones should be aware of the high risk of regime change via coups d’état and should form contingency plans for how their missions will change should a more or less cooperative leader suddenly take power.*
- *Conflict negotiations should include specific provisions for the post-war welfare of military elites. Concessions to rebels threaten military elites serving the incumbent government and assurances against future punishment or repression may decrease threat perceptions and the risk of coup attempts.*

BACKGROUND



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In support of the One Earth Future Foundation's efforts to reduce the frequency and pernicious effects of political violence around the world, Drs. Curtis Bell (OEF) and Jun Koga Sudduth (University of Strathclyde) published the first global quantitative study of the relationship between coups and civil wars. The study confirms that civil war dramatically increases the threat of a coup attempt. Moreover, it identifies conditions that make some civil wars more likely to be interrupted by coups than others. The study was recently published in *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* under the title "Causes and Outcomes of Coups during Civil War."



One Earth Future (OEF) Foundation leads initiatives to improve systems that prevent armed conflict. OEF is committed to improving governance structures by acting at the intersection of theory and practice, helping stakeholders solve specific problems in real time, contributing to research literature, and working to detect patterns and lessons about governance as they emerge.

For more information, visit www.oneearthfuture.org

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Cover: Left: Samuel Doe takes power in a coup, popular domain; Right: Azawad Separatists in Mali, photo by Russavia