

What Makes a Coup Succeed? Confidence, Consensus and a Sense of **Inevitability**

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By Max Fisher
May 2, 2019

To understand what makes a coup succeed, as recently happened in Sudan and Algeria, or fail, as it did this week in Venezuela, it helps to consider the strange events in Libya a half-century ago.

For much of 1969, the country was filled with rumors of an **imminent** coup. In September, a handful of military vehicles rolled up to government offices and communication centers, and a **terse** statement announced the end of Libya's **decrepit** monarchy.

Army units around the country, assuming that military chiefs were leading the coup and expecting them to show up at any moment, bloodlessly secured the rest of Libya. Foreign powers quickly recognized the new government. Nobody bothered to check who was leading the takeover.

A week later, an unknown 27-year-old army **signal corps** lieutenant announced that he and a few dozen low-level officers had in fact staged the coup. His name was Muammar el-Qaddafi.

If Libyans felt tricked, it was too late. Dislodging the officers would require a critical mass of Libya's power brokers, citizens and foreign allies to come together against the new rulers, something they hadn't managed even against the unpopular monarchy.

Mr. el-Qaddafi held power for 42 years.

This week in Venezuela, the opposition leader Juan Guaidó struggled to create that sense of inevitability for his plan to oust the president, Nicolás Maduro, but the military backing he called for never emerged.

His failure, alongside the success of recent movements to oust unpopular leaders in Algeria and Sudan, **underscores** the dynamics that typically make a coup succeed or fail. A **historic lull** in coups and revolutions appears to be ending, making these dynamics increasingly consequential well beyond Venezuela.

Confidence Games

We tend to think of coups as driven by angry protesters or **rogue** officers. But, in practice, they are almost always brought about by the country's **dominant** political, military and business elite.

Those power brokers, after all, have the final say over whether a leader stays or goes. But they can only remove a leader if they act together — making any coup what Naunihal Singh, a leading scholar of coups, called a “coordination game.”

In Libya, Mr. el-Qaddafi was able to set off the political equivalent of a **bank run**, with much of Libya joining his takeover, because the government's fall was widely assumed as imminent.

That sense of inevitability meant that each Libyan official assumed that the coup would succeed and that the new government would have wide backing, so they better go along.

Mr. Guaidó has been trying to cultivate a similar sense of consensus and inevitability among Venezuela's power brokers.

Some of Mr. Guaidó's failures have been tactical, such as issuing his call to action on Twitter, Mr. Singh said. Coup leaders traditionally favor national TV and radio stations because seizing them is a way to convince the country that they have already taken control.

Mr. Guaidó has also called on military leaders to join him, drawing attention to his lack of support.

“You don't say ‘We can win if only we have your support.’ What you say is ‘We've already won,’” Mr. Singh said. “By making it seem like you've already succeeded, you get the support necessary to succeed.”

There is a deeper issue that has **stalled** attempts at removing Mr. Maduro: Venezuela's power brokers, like its citizens and the wider international community, are deeply split.

Even if each individual political or business elite might be better off with Mr. Maduro gone, they cannot coordinate to create the necessary sense of inevitability. But many are receptive enough that the threat of a coup hangs over Venezuela.

It took 12 hours for Mr. Maduro to appear on TV announcing he was still in power — an **ominously** long delay.

Initiating a coup without that critical mass of elite support can be dangerous. When rogue officers tried to oust Turkey's government in 2016, they appeared to signal for political support that never materialized. The attempt, and the government's response, ended with dozens killed and the plotters in jail.

Demonstrating Inevitability

Turkey's debacle underscored that a coup is less a military operation than a collective action problem.

The elites who determine a coup's outcome are typically too numerous and dispersed to communicate directly. And they are risk-averse. The coup leaders' task is to persuade each elite that all the others will join in, **spurring** them to move in **unison**.

This often means marshaling protesters and foreign governments to the cause, creating the appearance of consensus.

That is why Venezuela's power struggle is partly playing out over a seemingly technical issue: Mr. Guaidó's claim to be the legitimate president.

A leader's legitimacy works like modern currencies. The paper itself has value only because consumers treat it as having value. Likewise, a leader is legitimate only as long as his country's citizens and institutions treat him as legitimate.

If enough Venezuelan citizens and institutions are swayed to treat Mr. Maduro as no longer legitimate, then he will cease to be legitimate in practice.

But a critical mass still treat him as legitimate, if only passively. Venezuela itself is a case in point: Even as runaway inflation has rendered its currency near valueless, citizens continue to use it.

Manufacturing Popular Consensus

Mr. Guaidó's challenge may be that he is trying to solve two problems at once. He is trying to use **hints** of elite defection from Mr. Maduro's government to **spur** a wider popular uprising. And he is trying to use protests to encourage more elite defections.

Those two audiences, in any movement to unseat a government, tend to want mutually exclusive outcomes. Elites typically want to uphold the status quo. Citizens usually want deeper changes: democracy, which threatens elites' power, and rule of law, which might threaten elites' income and even their freedom.

In Zimbabwe in 2017, this contradiction became apparent only after elites complied with protester demands to oust Robert Mugabe, the longtime leader. Rather than delivering democracy, they installed another insider.

The protests most likely provided the necessary spur for Zimbabwe's elites to coordinate in removing Mr. Mugabe. Still, they put their own interests first, using the protests as an excuse to switch out an unreliable old leader for a new one. The coup may have been a success for Zimbabwe's elites, but arguably not for its citizens.

Protesters in Algeria and Sudan, after successfully pushing for the ouster of their own aging despots, are watching for a similar **bait-and-switch**.

Both coups were textbook cases: Powerful and tightly unified elites, who would have coordinated with relative ease, seized on protests to remove a weak and unpopular leader.

The odds of a coup leading to democracy are slim. Since World War II, democracy followed only one in four instances in which a dictator was removed from office.

Even when coup leaders begin a real transition to democracy, they will often ensure that the elite's privileges and rights remain in place, all but guaranteeing that full democracy cannot take hold until the old elite quite literally die out.

Still, for citizens in countries without meaningful elections, protests calling on their elite to remove the leader by force might be the only plausible way to force change.

Amy Erica Smith, an Iowa State University political scientist, wrote for the website Vox that conditions in Venezuela heighten odds of a coup leading to democracy, citing "a discredited authoritarian regime; a history of citizen-led resistance against the regime; an alliance between democratic politicians and the military; a history of partisan electoral competition."

Still, the same conditions that have made Mr. Maduro's government unusually resistant to coup attempts — a divided elite and population, deep corruption in the military, a **deadlock** among foreign powers — could make establishing democracy difficult.

"History is littered with cases of military-supported transitions of power," Ms. Smith wrote, "that are supposed to lead to elections and democracy ... and don't."

The Interpreter is a column by Max Fisher and Amanda Taub exploring the ideas and context behind major world events. Follow them on Twitter @Max_Fisher and @amandataub.

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