



Anti-Coup. A coup d'état—commonly called a coup or putsch—is a sudden, illegitimate takeover of a government. The term “anti-coup” refers to resistance against a coup.

The most common sort of coup is a takeover by a section of the military forces. In the past century there have been hundreds of such coups, especially in South America, Africa, and Asia. Some coups are against elected governments, others against dictators.

Coups have many damaging consequences, especially when they involve overthrow of an elected government. A coup typically involves arrests and imprisonment of opponents, control over the mass media, restrictions on civil liberties, and temporary or indefinite suspension of parliamentary systems. Occasionally, however, coups against dictators can be liberating, such as the 1974 coup in Portugal that ended fascist rule and led to free elections.

To prevent or oppose coups, the conventional approach is to instill in military forces a respect for civilian government. An alternative approach, promoted by supporters of nonviolent action, is for citizens to refuse to cooperate with a coup, thereby undermining it. Three examples of civilian anti-coup efforts are frequently cited: Germany in 1920, Algeria and France in 1961, and the Soviet Union in 1991.

Anti-Coup Case Studies

In March 1920, Germany's elected government was ousted by military forces in what was known as the Kapp putsch. The most important resistance to Kapp's forces was in the capital, Berlin, by civilians. There were massive rallies and a general strike. Significantly, officials at all levels refused to accept the legitimacy of the putsch. For example, bank officials refused to honor checks presented by the putschists unless signed by appropriate officials, and no officials would sign. Typists refused to type Kapp's proclamations. The coup collapsed within a few days and the elected government, which had fled Berlin, was able to return and resume its position.

In 1961, Algeria was ruled by France and indeed was considered part of France. Since the mid-1950s, Algerian nationalists had waged a guerrilla war for independence. They were met by brutal French military repression. After French president Charles de Gaulle announced he would negotiate with the nationalists, French generals in Algeria, fearing a handover

of power, staged a coup on 21 August 1961. There was a threat of a parallel putsch in France, or an invasion. Ten million French workers joined a general strike in protest. De Gaulle, after a couple of days, broadcast an appeal to civilians and troops to refuse to cooperate with the generals. Many French soldiers in Algeria stayed in their barracks, not assisting the coup. Many pilots flew their planes out of the country and did not return. Others caused inefficiency, for example, by faking mechanical problems. The coup failed within a few days primarily because of noncooperation.

In 1991 in the Soviet Union, opponents of President Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms detained him, arrested activists, closed down opposition media, and declared a state of emergency. Although many people just went about their business as usual, there was considerable opposition to this coup. Journalists prepared opposition newspapers. Resisters used the fledgling e-mail system to communicate and send appeals for support. Boris Yeltsin at the Russian parliament building in Moscow became the symbolic center of the resistance. Thousands of people came to offer support. They attempted to win over troops. The coup leaders instructed an elite strike force to take over the parliament building, but these troops failed to follow orders because they did not want to fire on Russian civilians. The coup was unsuccessful.

The Anti-Coup and Nonviolent Action

These three examples show that coups can be thwarted by citizen noncooperation. These anti-coup efforts were mostly nonviolent, which had the advantage of weakening the commitment of troops to the coup leaders; armed resistance, in contrast, would have polarized the situation as well as given more legitimacy for use of force in support of the coup.

However, vigorous citizen anti-coup efforts are rare compared to acquiescence. A key reason is that there is no planning and preparation for citizens to oppose coups. Some measures to increase the capacity for opposing coups include education, legislation, simulations, building international support, and setting up communication systems.

Gene Sharp and Bruce Jenkins, in their important manual *The Anti-Coup*, give two principles for anti-coup defense: deny legitimacy to the putschists and resist them with noncooperation and defiance. The manual includes guidelines for resistance, such as denouncing coup leaders, refusing to cooperate, keeping legitimate organizations functioning, and undermining the allegiance of soldiers and others involved in the coup.

The civilian anti-coup is an application of the methods of nonviolent action to a particular task, opposing a coup. The anti-coup has affinities with the use of nonviolent action for defense, in what is called nonviolent defense, social defense, or civilian-based defense. In nonviolent defense, civil resistance is an alternative to military defense for resisting external attacks. The nonviolent anti-coup is essentially nonviolent defense against a country's own military forces.

The occurrence of military coups reveals a flaw at the heart of rationales for military defense. Military forces are supposed to be for defending a society against violent threats, but with a coup the military becomes a threat to a country's own people. Some military regimes have engaged in massive torture and killing, even genocide. Indeed, people are threatened by their own militaries in more countries than are threatened by foreign militaries. In Fiji, for example, where there is no external military threat, there have been repeated coups since the mid-1980s. In such cases, having a military is not a solution but instead a serious problem. If a society converted from military defense to nonviolent defense, then there would be no threat of a coup.

Despite the logic and value of training citizens to resist coups, there have been few initiatives in this direction, probably for the same reason that governments have done little to explore nonviolent defense: empowering citizens to resist illegitimate rule also gives them the power to oppose unpopular policies. Therefore, the most likely way that the capacity of civilians to oppose coups will develop is through a more general increase in awareness and use of nonviolent action for campaigning.

When a coup is obviously unjust, for example when military forces oust a popular elected government and kill many civilians, the need for anti-coup action is apparent, though this may be difficult to achieve in the circumstances. But sometimes the illegitimacy of a coup is not so clear-cut. For example, legal processes may be used, with the threat of force in the background, in what might be called a "constitutional coup." Sometimes a government leader declares a state of emergency—as did Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India, in 1975—in a process that operates like a coup in many respects except that key figures at the top remain in their positions.

In such situations, opponents of coups may have greater difficulty mobilizing support, because there is more ambiguity about the legitimacy and need for the changes. Coup leaders normally take control of the mass media and therefore have a powerful platform to present their perspective on what is happening. Opponents need to engage in a struggle over

interpretations and legitimacy.

The amount of writing about opposing coups is limited. There is a need for more studies of resistance, both successful and unsuccessful, and of the effectiveness of measures to deter coups.

[See also [Civil Resistance as a Peace Policy](#); [Glasnost and Perestroika](#); Nonviolent Action, *subentry on* Nonviolent Action as Active Resistance; [Psychology of Nonviolent Action](#); and [Wars of National Liberation \(Anticolonial and Nationalist Wars\)](#)]

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