

When Military Coups d'état Become Acts of Social Justice

Written by Nadine Olafsson

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NADINE OLAFSSON, JAN 17 2020

Military leaders and policy makers have long been preoccupied with the ethical and just conduct of the military in times of conflict (*Jus in Bello*). Throughout the years, Western conceptions of soldiers are founded on the idea of a stoic and apolitical warrior who does not involve himself in domestic affairs of the state and does not question the foreign policy of the nation. Current civil-military relations theory still focuses primarily on the idea of preventing a military coup. Despite this, history has plenty of examples where soldiers launched military coups to side with the civil population, rather than the civil authority. I asked myself: what criteria would we forge to assess whether a military coup is socially just? I will begin by defining the concepts of the military coup d'état and social justice as understood by Rawls (1958), followed by a careful outline of four criteria that must be met for a military coup d'état to be considered socially just: redistribution of power, popular support, lack of retribution, and acting in the interest of the state.

Military Coups and Social Justice

Civil-military relations today continue to be based on the paradox of the military having to be strong enough to threaten the state, with many nations choosing to weaken their own military in order for it not to be a threat, or to engage in preventative efforts or so-called "coup proofing". Coup-proofing efforts have entailed various activities, including the establishment of loyalties between the military and civil authority along ethnic, religious, or personal bonds (Brooks, 1998; Albrecht, 2015); military recruitment from privileged minorities and mercenaries (Quinlivan, 1999); counterbalancing divided security apparatuses (Kamrava, 2000), frequent rotation to avoid the formation of power centers (Belkin and Schofer, 2003); corruption by affording military members economic privileges; and the crafting of international alliances (N'Diaye, 2001).

A coup d'état is defined as "the infiltration of a small but critical segment of the state apparatus which is then used to displace the government" (Luttwak, 1979, 26-27). As Rebecca Schiff (2009:21) argues, "while political and social changes may occur afterwards, the coup itself is an exchange of power by elites through military force without significant national transformations". In other words, aspiring to achieve or achieving social justice is not a requirement of a military coup d'état per se. Yet, there are numerous examples of coups, that did indeed aspire to achieve social change, whether they were successful in doing so or not, and which will be elaborated on further in the following sections.

Social justice is a complex term that warrants further elaboration. As Rainwater (1974: 159) points out, "there is no shortage of ready judgement of what is fair, equitable, just and reasonable or what is unfair, unjust and arbitrary about the rewards and lack of rewards available to different categories of people in society". Authors however generally agree that, unlike legal justice, social justice is based on a distributive, rather than a retributive, notion of justice and seeks to transform society to a more desirable state for a larger amount of people than is the status quo. Of particular influence in this field is John Rawls (1958), who defines justice along two criteria. Firstly, everyone has the right to the same liberties as all others; and secondly, both equalities and inequalities are arbitrary unless addressing them will likely lead to advantages for everyone and everyone has equal access to them.

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The idea of linking the military to the concept of social justice is not new. In fact, Reverend Scott linked this idea directly with the concept of justice in his 1780 Sermon to a volunteer regiment in Dublin:

He [God] united in the same persons the usually distinct characters of Citizens and Soldiers, for “every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon”, and thus bid defiance to the malice of his opponents. Each individual being inspired with the same ruling principle, a zealous concern for the public good, thus were the weak, the oppressed, and the despised enabled to assert their rights, and to maintain the justice of their cause against (...) all the power of their Enemies. (6)

In other words, soldiers are encouraged to act in the interest of the public good to support the oppressed and assert their voices, while maintaining a just cause.

Various examples exist of military coups that can be seen as acts of social justice. Broadly speaking, this occurs when the military rises up against its own civil authority, in defense of the general population. Yet, this is not sufficient to qualify as social justice. We must then ask ourselves, what criteria need to be met for a military coup to be considered socially just? Making use of approximately a dozen coups d'états that have occurred across Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia over the past 50 years, four broad criteria emerge that must be met in order for a military coup to be considered an act of social justice: a redistribution of power, popular support, lack of retribution, and acting in the interest of the nation. Examples will be given for each criterion to further elaborate in the following sections.

Redistribution of power

Firstly, because of the distributive nature of justice, a socially just military coup would need to seek a redistribution of justice, both because of the nature of the military coup and the nature of civil-military relations. This would not mean for the military itself to assume the power of the civil authority, but instead to redistribute political power by removing the civil authority, while remaining committed to hand over power to a civil authority over a specified period of time that is representative of the general population. One form of doing this handover would be after holding free and fair elections.

The Zimbabwean military coup d'état in November 2017 by factions of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF) forced the resignation of former President Robert Mugabe, a week after he had dismissed his vice-president Mnangagwa. Less than a week following the coup, Mnangagwa was sworn in as interim president to serve the remainder of Mugabe's term before re-elections would be held. The recent Zimbabwean coup thus serves as an example of a military coup that was followed by a swift handover of power to a constitutionally designated replacement.

The handover of power, however, does not necessarily occur immediately after a coup. In some cases, there may not be a suitable option available for an interim government or there may be concern that free and fair elections could not be held in the immediate aftermath of a coup. In such cases, the military establishment itself may form an interim government to keep the peace. One example of such circumstances is the Thai military coup in September 2006. The Royal Thai Army ousted former president Thaksin Shinawatra prior to upcoming elections, due to his alleged creation of a rift in society, corruption, nepotism, interference in independent agencies, and insults to his royal highness, the King. Following a period of a little over a year, re-elections were held following the disbandment of Shinawatra's original political party. While some would argue that this particular case could be seen as being in violation of what Rawls refers to as access to equal opportunities for members of the former political party, party members were effectively not prevented from forming a new party per se and participating in the political process that way.

By asserting that a redistribution of power is necessary for a military coup d'état to be considered socially just, we automatically exclude any Oligarchical Praetorianist coup. Huntington (1968) sees Oligarchical Praetorianism as a type of coup where exclusive social or political groups collude with the military. As the military becomes the dominant oligarchic group it seeks to take power through a coup and overthrow the previous oligarchic group in government. They are generally non-violent coups where one elite group replaces another and leaves the general population

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relatively uninvolved in the process. Finer (1988) sees one example of this as being the overthrow of the Thai monarchy in 1932 by a group of civilians and military personnel that had grown resentful of the monarchy. The changeover of power left the public relatively uninvolved and did not redistribute power in a significant way that would have led to widespread improvement of social conditions or a diminishing of inequalities.

In sum, the redistribution of power following the coup is a necessary criterion to exclude Oligarchal Praetorianist coups, but can be either swift and according to constitutional provisions or following a military interim government, provided that power is returned following a predetermined amount of time.

Popular Support

For a military coup d'état to be considered socially just requires for it to side with the poor and the oppressed, rather than the status quo. The most straightforward way of monitoring this, is the response it receives by the general population, meaning that popular support is a crucial criterion to add to the equation. One clear example of this is the Egyptian military coup of February 2011. Following weeks of intense protests in Tahir Square in Egypt's capital, and other large cities, President Mubarak resigned and turned power over to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, a military junta that would rule for the following six months until elections could be held. While some suspicion was voiced in the immediate aftermath of the Egyptian "revolution"/coup d'état, the population overwhelmingly endorsed the military government and no protests were seen in the aftermath of the ousting of president Mubarak (Holmes, 2014).

A counterexample of this on the other hand, is the Thai military coup of 2014 by General Chan-o-cha. The stated goal of the coup was the restoration of peace and order, particularly in the capital Bangkok, which had been disrupted over the previous six months by two rival factions of protesters. Unlike previous coups, it was followed by waves of protests from all segments of the population, both from academia and the rural population.

It should be noted, that Holmes (2014) observed that the way military coups are received by the population, regardless of their outcome, stands in relation to the history and the relationship the military has with the civil population. In Egypt, the Free Officers liberated the country from the British and built their anticolonial legacy around protecting the nation from external threats, leading to a situation in which some parts of the protest movement supported the military intervention that removed President Mohamed Morsi. In Turkey, the series of coups, in 1960, 1971, and 1980, were directed against internal threats: revolutionaries who challenged the state. Hence the vast majority of Gezi Park protesters maintain a critical distance from the military (Holmes, 2014, 380). This is crucial to keep in mind, when assessing this criterion, as it may convolute the outcome.

Popular support is a crucial criterion to assess whether or not a military coup d'état is an act of social justice, as it is a clear expression of whether or not the intent is to create a better environment for all. However, a lack of popular support does not necessarily indicate a lack of social justice, but rather could be convoluted by the population's historical interpretation of the coup or the relationship between the military as an institution and the general population.

Lack of Retribution

Another criterion for a military coup to be considered socially just includes a lack of violent retribution by the military in its immediate aftermath. The basis of this criterion is Rawls' (1958) assertion that social justice should expand (in)equality, but never at the expense of another. Therefore, if an intervention does not lead to a greater well-being (including physical well-being) for all, it cannot be seen as an act of social justice. There are two exemptions from this case: imprisonment and middle class Praetorianism types of coups. The imprisonment of political opponents per se is excluded, provided they are to stand free and fair trials, as was the case with former president Mohamed Mursi and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

It is further important to note that this does not include potential bloodshed during the military coup itself, as would be common with middle-class Praetorianism types of coups. As Schiff points out they "involve a more broadly-based

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army operating within a centralized state. In particular the officer corps ally with various social groups that have become dissatisfied with the ruling Oligarchy" (22). One example of this is the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, where factions of the Turkish Armed Forces, calling themselves the Peace at Home Council, attempted to oust president Recep Tayyip Erdogan from power. The Council stated that the erosion of secularism, the elimination of democratic rule, and the disregard for Human Rights as reasons for the coup. Approximately 80,000 people were arrested, detained or removed from their jobs, including academics and teachers in the aftermath of the coup, while over 280 people died during the coup attempt itself (Said-Moorehouse, 2016, 1).

In sum, adding a lack of retribution as a criterion ensures that Rawls principle of justice not being at to the detriment of any party, is preserved, while still allowing for some leniency, such as imprisonment followed by fair trials and violence that occurs during middle-class Praetorianist types of coups, which have a tendency to be more violent by nature.

Acting in the Interest of the State

Acting in the interest of the state as a criterion entails being committed to or acting out of concern for the well-being of the nation itself, which excludes acting solely out of self-interest or self-preservation. The soldier coming in defense of the polis is an ancient concept that persists to this day. Today the term citizen soldier is used primarily to refer to members of the reserve force, or in the case of the United States also the National Guard. The hypothesis is that reservists maintain two separate identities: that of the civilian and that of the soldier. They are thus more likely to identify and side with the civilian population. The concept is also at the heart of alternative military organizational arrangements, such as standing armies or draft armies, maintained by countries such as Switzerland, Syria, and Israel.

The allegiance to something bigger than the immediate political arrangements of the country therefore exclude what Singh (2010) refers to as the corporate interest hypothesis, whereby the military acts out of self-interest and self-preservation for its own enrichment, ironically one of the strategies used to coup-proof. There are various reasons the military can act based on this criterion, primarily constitutional reform intended to extend the power or length of the presidency. One example of this particular manifestation of the criterion is the 2010 military coup in Niger. The artillery company moved to remove former president Mamadou Tandja from power, following his decision to extend his presidency by a third term. As Baudais and Chauzan (2011:295) point out, "the constitutional revision alienated not only Tandja's old political partners, but also the army and the international community".

Concluding remarks

The field of military studies and the field of social justice are often seen as antagonisms, when they do not necessarily have to be. By offering a basic benchmark to categorize military coups that qualify as acts of social justice, this article debunks the very myth at the heart of civil-military relations theory: that military coups must be avoided at all costs, rather than seeing them as a potential preservation mechanism for the state itself from possible infractions from those in power. Further inquiries into this area would thereby have the potential of further disrupting the long-established paradigm and perhaps help the military community be seen as a resource for those who suffer from systemic political, economic, and social oppression.

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