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THE LIMITS OF THE ‘DEMOCRATIC COUP’ THESIS: INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND POST-COUP AUTHORITARIANISM

Abstract

Recent studies have suggested that post-Cold War coups are much more likely to be followed by democratic elections than their Cold War predecessors, and that this trend is the result of the rise of international policies of democratic conditionality. Some argue we live in an age of the ‘democratic coup’. This paper makes two principal contributions to the debate on the relationship between coups and regime type. First, it presents an analysis of the post-coup trajectories of coup countries after 1991. Using descriptive statistics to highlight trends across the post-Cold War cases, the analysis raises questions over any optimistic view of the capacity of coups to contribute to long-term democratization. While there is a clear trend for holding post-coup elections within five years of a coup, most countries experiencing coups fail to go on to establish high quality democratic rule and consolidate some form of authoritarian rule. Coups are not a force for democracy. Second, the paper adds to our understanding of the international dimensions of post-coup political development by highlighting the role of international autocratic sponsors. When states are strategically important, or when they have strong linkages to non-western autocracies, coup leaders are likely to receive international support and protection rather than condemnation and sanctions. The article examines the cases of post-coup authoritarian consolidation in Fiji and Egypt to illustrate the arguments.

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Recent research has pointed to the emergence of ‘democratic coups’ in the post-Cold War era – unconstitutional seizures of power that act as the midwife of democratic rule due to the swift holding of post-coup elections (Varol 2012; J. Powell 2014; Trithart 2013). This pattern has in turn been attributed to the increasing use of democratic conditionality in the post-Cold War era, as (mostly) Western states and international organizations use democratic enforcement measures to pressure coup leaders to give up the reins of power (Marinov and Goemans 2014). In this article, I argue that these recent accounts oversell the democratic coup thesis, and fail to acknowledge both the extent of authoritarian resilience after coups and the role played by international autocratic sponsors in underwriting post-coup autocracy. I make two contributions that shed light on the politics of post-coup trajectories.

First, through an analysis of the post-coup trajectories of coup countries after 1991 I show that there are a number of problems with the recent narrative that coups are increasingly associated with democracy. While coups are increasingly followed by the introduction of some of the institutional trappings of democracy, this trend has not been universal and many of the states that have held elections have done so as part of a process of introducing some form of competitive authoritarian regime. Too often, the recent research on the relationship between coups and democracy has focused excessively on the role of electoral politics. Yet, elections, even competitive ones, are compatible with forms of autocratic as well as democratic rule (Schedler 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). Several regimes that held elections shortly after experiencing coups nonetheless continued to exhibit strong authoritarian tendencies, as incumbents worked to resist genuine democratic rule (e.g. Cambodia after its 1997 coup). Other regimes, such as Pakistan after 1999 and Egypt after 2013, held deeply flawed elections, and a number of regimes held no post-coup elections within five years (e.g. Fiji after 2006). On average, coup-stricken countries experience only a negligible increase in democracy levels (less than one point on the Polity scale), and many experience steep reductions. The association of coups and democracy is thus one that should be treated with caution, and there is ample evidence that authoritarian resilience remains a core feature of post-coup politics in the contemporary world. Overall, coups are not a force for democratic change.

Second, I identify the role played by international sponsors of autocratic regimes in accounting for patterns of post-coup authoritarian resilience. Recent approaches to explaining post-coup trajectories have focused excessively on the actions and influence of pro-democratic international actors. While international democratizing pressures have undoubtedly played a role in increasing the rates of initial post-coup elections, the full variation in post-coup outcomes must be accounted for with reference to the permissive and supportive policies of external actors. Two factors contribute to a supportive international environment for post-coup incumbents. First, if a state is strategically important, Western actors may refrain from enforcing their democratic conditionality provisions, and may instead offer robust assistance. Coup leaders that seize power in strategically important states, even if they are highly dependent on external donors, may thus receive an easy ride. Second, many states enjoy a broad spectrum of international linkages, and ties to non-Western autocratic powers can facilitate crucial external support. Even when Western actors impose costly sanctions, non-Western autocracies can sponsor coup leaders in diplomatic and material ways that compensate for other losses.

I illustrate these dynamics with reference to events in the wake of coups in Fiji and Egypt, both of which enjoyed supportive international environments for post-coup authoritarian consolidation. The Fijian coup of 2006 was led by army leader Frank Bainimarama, who refused to hold post-coup elections despite intense pressure from

neighbouring democracies. Instead, Bainimarama presided over a closed political system and actively suppressed political competition before finally holding elections in 2014. His freedom to manoeuvre in a context of Western condemnation and sanctions was crucially enhanced by robust diplomatic and material support from China. More recently, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's 2013 coup in Egypt was greeted by its allies with either mild criticism or fulsome praise, and with a range of diplomatic and economic responses that provided a permissive, and at certain points a highly supportive, international environment for the consolidation of post-coup authoritarianism. Both Fiji and Egypt benefited from their regional strategic importance and their diverse spectrum of international linkages.

POST-COUP AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION

To date, the political analysis of coups has tended to focus on the sources of coup risk, and the factors that make coups more or less likely to occur (Johnson, Slater, and McGowan 1984; Londregan and Poole 1990; Belkin and Schofer 2003; Roessler 2011; Quinlivan 1999). By contrast, there is limited analysis of the politics of post-coup politics, and it is only in recent years that scholars have sought to systematically analyse the political trajectory of coup countries (Marinov and Goemans 2014; J. Powell 2014). The long-term outcomes of coups vary widely across cases, not least because post-coup leaders vary in their capacity to retain the power they have gained. Although scholars are increasingly recognizing the international determinants of post-coup trajectories, to date they have emphasized the democracy-supporting influences of international actors, and under-appreciated the role of international sponsors of post-coup autocracy.

Coup plotters face a number of challenges to their efforts to consolidate and solidify their rule. As Svobik has shown, most autocratic rulers are dislodged by coups, and coups are more likely to take place in the early years of an autocrat's rule (Svobik 2012, 5, 77). Coup leaders thus have to be fearful of being targets of a coup themselves before they can feel secure in power. Furthermore, like all autocratic rulers, coup leaders must also be wary of threats from the masses. While some coups are welcomed by large sectors of the public (e.g. Suharto's coup in Indonesia in 1965), coups are often associated with an increased risk of mass pro-democracy protests (Brancati 2014, 1520). After the Thai army removed the elected government in May 2014, protestors took to the streets to demand a return to civilian rule, and similar demonstrations took place on the first anniversary of the coup in May 2015 (Sridharan 2015; *BBC* 2014). Even though the 2013 coup in Egypt was strongly supported among large sections of Egyptian society, supporters of the ousted President Morsi mobilized to denounce the coup, prompting a brutal and violent crackdown by the army (*BBC News* 2015).

The ability of coup plotters to successfully navigate these challenges and consolidate authoritarian rule rests on a number of diverse factors, many of them rooted in domestic politics. Although there is little dedicated scholarship on the sources of post-coup authoritarian resilience, insights from the wider literature on authoritarianism shed light on many important coup cases. Elite cohesion plays an important role in reducing the risk from rival elites, and coup leaders thus rely in part on the unity of key actors within the new regime. For cases of military coups, military unity obviously plays a crucial role. Military coups are frequently spearheaded by a single branch of the military, rather than the institution as a whole, and it is by no means guaranteed that the other branches of the military will support the coup leaders (Singh 2014). Cleavages within the military often result in failed coups, but even when coups are successful, institutional factionalism can undermine the prospects for stable and enduring authoritarianism. For example, Thailand's history of short-lived military regimes punctuated by military coups in the decades after WWII was the result of endemic military factionalism, with rival military leaders consistently seeking to out-manoeuvre one another. By contrast,

a potent threat of communist mobilization in Indonesia forged military unity that contributed to prolonged rule after Suharto's coup of 1966 (Slater 2010, 241).

Elite unity and cohesion can also be facilitated by the use of political institutions. Autocratic regimes that utilize legislative institutions are likely to endure much longer than those that do not (Svolik 2012, 111/2; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). The creation of ruling political parties can channel public support and facilitate co-option and oversight of potential elite rivals. Enduring post-coup autocratic regimes in countries such as Egypt and Iraq rested in significant part on the establishment of ruling political parties (Brownlee 2007). Coup leaders also often combine institutional innovations with political repression, outlawing opposition parties, imprisoning rival elites and using violence against the public. For example, Suharto did not rely on military unity alone, and also engaged in large-scale and brutal repression of his communist rivals (Boudreau 2009).

Yet the fate of post-coup regimes does not rest exclusively on domestic politics, and international factors play an important role. Some international forces lower rather than raise the prospects for authoritarian consolidation when coups are concerned. I follow Powell and Thyne's definition of a coup as entailing 'illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive', and coups are thus distinguished from efforts to introduce or consolidate authoritarianism that are initiated by sitting incumbents, such as electoral fraud or violent repression (J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011, 252). Since the end of the Cold War, an emerging normative agenda in favour of democratic rule has placed a special emphasis on countering political coups, and an 'anti-coup norm' has been increasingly institutionalized (Shannon et al. 2015). In the realm of international democracy enforcement, coups are often treated differently from other breaches of democratic norms and practice. Coups are highly visible, and cannot easily be concealed in the ways that some forms of electoral fraud and political repression can be obscured (Beaulieu and Hyde 2009). When a coup takes place, there is little room for doubt about what has happened and who is responsible. Similarly, the very fact that coups are pursued by opponents of incumbents, rather than incumbents themselves, gives rise to greater international opprobrium. Decisions about democratic enforcement are made by incumbent leaders, and it is not surprising that they are more interested in punishing behaviour that threatens incumbents than behaviour that prolongs incumbent rule. For example, while the African Union has suspended several member states in the wake of political coups, including Togo in 2005, Guinea in 2008, and Egypt in 2013, it has tended to be much more lenient in response to election irregularities and other forms of democratic backsliding (Magliveras 2011; Williams 2007, 274). Coup plotters are thus often subject to unusually high levels of international punishment compared to incumbent leaders who seek to maintain power through non-democratic means. This dynamic contributes to the striking nature of the democratic coup thesis, which emphasizes the democratizing effects of these brazen practices, while making no claims about other forms of autocratic behaviour carried out by incumbents.

Insights from the literature on the international dimensions of democratization highlight how external actors can pressurize post-coup regimes and increase the prospects for post-coup transitions to democracy rather than autocratic consolidation. There are two broad mechanisms that are relevant for post-coup regimes. First, international actors can enhance the domestic threats that post-coup regimes face from both rival elites and the masses. In terms of rival elites, external actors can support the ousted government and work to restore the former authorities to power, thus increasing the risk that the coup leaders will themselves be ousted. For example, the international community played a major role in supporting the return to power of political leaders ousted by coups in both Haiti after the 1991 coup and Sierra Leone after 1997 (Halperin and Lomasney 1998). In terms of the masses, international attention and condemnation

can inform and embolden domestic opposition actors, and contribute to domestic protests.¹ The second mechanism entails a reduction of the capacity of the new regime to respond to such threats. International actors can use punishments such as trade sanctions or reductions in financial aid that can materially affect the capacity of the ruling government. Several international organizations have introduced provisions to sanction member states whose leaders have acquired power by overthrowing elected governments (Wobig 2015; Legler and Tieku 2010).

The most well-developed account of post-coup political development that takes international forces seriously is offered by Marinov and Goemans, and focuses primarily on the democracy-supporting and autocracy-subverting role of international actors. The authors make two significant contributions. First, they identify a post-Cold War trend away from post-coup authoritarian consolidation. Prior to 1991, most coups were followed by the consolidation of enduring authoritarian regimes. In contrast, after 1991 most coups have been followed by free and fair elections within five years (Marinov and Goemans 2014). This finding is supported by other recent research. For example, Thyne and Powell's analysis of a global sample of authoritarian regimes suggests that coups can increase the likelihood of democracy, and do so in particular in the types of regime that otherwise would be most resistant to democracy (e.g. regimes with strongly authoritarian or long-standing leaders) (Thyne and Powell 2014). This association between coups and democracy has given rise to the idea of the 'democratic coup', in which coup leaders overthrow an autocratic leader with a view to guiding the country to democracy rather than for personal gain and power (Varol 2012; J. Powell 2014; Trithart 2013).

Second, Marinov and Goemans offer an original theory for this shift in post-coup trajectories, and argue that the increase in international democracy promotion explains the shift away from post-coup authoritarian consolidation. With the end of the Cold War, western states and international organizations developed a strong normative preference for democracy, and increasingly used their material leverage to promote democratic development abroad. In particular, the rise of democratic conditionality created a new incentive structure for coup leaders who come to power in countries that rely on international donors for significant national income. Countries that are dependent on aid are much more likely to be vulnerable to democratic conditionality applied by their donors, and more likely to introduce elections to satisfy those donors as a result. In this account, the combination of aid dependence and international democratic conditionality explains the decline of post-coup authoritarian resilience (Marinov and Goemans 2014).

INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND POST-COUP AUTHORITARIANISM

In contrast with the arguments outlined above, I argue that recent accounts of the relationship between coups and post-coup regimes have oversold the link between coups and democracy, and have neglected the patterns of authoritarian resilience in many post-coup settings. While increasing rates of post-coup elections are not in doubt, the contribution of these elections to processes of genuine democratization has so far been taken too much at face value. While elections can serve as a pathway to sustainable democracy, they may also be used by sitting incumbents to entrench authoritarian rule and facilitate incumbent survival rather than act as any kind of threat to it (Lindberg 2009; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). Coups still frequently give rise to closed or competitive authoritarian regimes (discussed further in the next section).

Furthermore, while international politics undoubtedly plays a role in encouraging elections in the wake of political coups, insufficient attention has been paid to the

¹ For a discussion of similar dynamics regarding election monitoring, see (Kelley 2012, 103; Tucker 2007, 541).

diversity of international influences that coup leaders are subjected to. Marinov and Goemans, for example, explore only the western, pro-democratic international influences on domestic-level coup leaders. However, a growing literature on the international politics of authoritarian rule points to the crucial role of international supporters of autocratic incumbents (Burnell and Schlumberger 2010; Tolstrup 2013a; Vanderhill 2013). So-called ‘black knights’ (including both democratic and autocratic states) have been shown to support and protect autocratic regimes under a wide range of circumstances, often motivated by a desire to keep compliant elites in place and avoid the instability that regime change can sometimes bring about (Ambrosio 2014; Tolstrup 2015; Levitsky and Way 2010, 41; von Soest 2015; Whitehead 2014). In order to understand the variation in post-coup trajectories, and in particular the resilience of authoritarianism in many coup countries, it is essential to examine not only the pro-democracy pressure that coup leaders are subjected to from Western states and international organizations, but also the permissive and supportive international environments that are often created by the active sponsorship received from supportive external (Tansey 2016a). Many coup leaders find that they are located within an international environment that includes not only critical democracy enforcers, but also supportive international sponsors. While ‘linkage to the West’ can create pressures for democratization, strategic interests can sometimes override its influences and linkages with autocratic regimes can help bolster the position of post-coup incumbents (Levitsky and Way 2010; Tolstrup 2013b; Vanderhill 2013). Some of these considerations have been incorporated into studies of the *causes* of coups (Thyne 2010), but the scholarship on the consequences of coups has yet to adequately consider them.

To fully appreciate the wider international influences on post-coup trajectories, it is therefore necessary to examine the full ‘linkage spectrum’ that each country has with external actors, and assess the type of international environment it is located within (Tansey 2016a). Historical and deep-rooted linkages with autocratic actors can generate international support for post-coup governments, and coup leaders often appeal to a state’s historical allies to approve of their actions. Coups that take place in strategically important countries may also receive external support if they further the strategic interests of outside powers.² Consequently, many coup plotters find that their interests align with those of influential external actors, and once they come to power they enjoy an international environment that is largely un-constraining.

For some, the post-coup international environment may simply be a permissive one, and for various reasons international actors may refrain from punishing the new elites. Although Marinov and Goemans’ analysis suggests that economic dependence will lead coup plotters to introduce elections for fear of Western punishment, international conditions are frequently not enforced even in highly dependent countries. Many post-Cold War coup cases have been highly dependent on external donors, but were not subject to the kind of democratic enforcement that would create major incentives for democratic reform. Research by von Soest and Wahman highlights the variation in democratic sanctions by Western powers, and demonstrates the uneven international response to international coups. Their dataset of democratic sanctions episodes reveals a number of enforcement actions against post-coup authorities, but also shows that multiple post-Cold War coup cases, including aid dependent countries such as Burundi, Mali, and Mauritania, that were not subject to democratic sanctions in the years after the coup took place (von Soest and Wahman 2015a). Elsewhere, democratic enforcement was relatively half-hearted or short-lived. In the wake of the 1997 coup in Cambodia, Japan (Cambodia’s largest donor) temporarily cut off international aid. Yet

² On the strategic logic behind international reactions to authoritarian regimes and practices, see for example (Brownlee 2012; Donno 2010; von Soest and Wahman 2015b).

it resumed aid within a matter of weeks based on verbal guarantees of reform, rather than any real change (Refworld 2015). Cambodia did go on to hold elections in 1998 but these contributed only to the consolidation of competitive authoritarianism, and Cambodia been classified as 'Not Free' by Freedom House for every year since those elections. Similarly, although the US has a legal obligation to cut off aid to countries where democratic leaders have been removed through a coup, it is often cautious in applying the rule and regularly avoids using the 'coup' word for purely political purposes (Fisher 2013).

Many coup leaders, however, benefit from more than a permissive environment, and receive active and intentional international support. Once offered, international sponsorship can help consolidate post-coup authoritarianism in a number of ways, involving both informational and material mechanisms. In informational terms, international sponsors can offer clear signals of support that can help consolidate the position of post-coup incumbents.³ If international supporters offer swift recognition of the new government, it can provide legitimacy to the new regime. Recognition of the new authorities sends a clear signal of external support that can reassure elite actors and increase the prospects for elite cohesion.⁴ It can also send a signal of the strength of the regime to the public, and dampen the appetite for public protests. Vocal diplomatic support of this kind can also involve reinforcing the narrative of the coup plotters, as external actors endorse their stated reasons for undertaking the coup and denounce their critics (see the discussion of Saudi Arabia and Egypt's 2013 coup below).

In material terms, international sponsors can provide newly installed coup leaders with financial or security support to assist their efforts to consolidate their power. Such actions bolster the capacity of the new authorities to fend off potential challenges and increase the prospects for authoritarian consolidation. As several authors have observed, authoritarian resilience depends in part on the capacity of state institutions (Levitsky and Way 2010; Way 2005; Slater 2010). International sponsorship that contributes to state capacity can thus facilitate regime consolidation. External supporters can also serve to counter the negative effects of sanctions that may be applied by more critical international actors, as new loans or aid compensate for the losses incurred by democratic enforcement measures. Such sanctions-busting behaviour can protect the new incumbents from the most damaging material effects of international censure (Early 2011).

I also argue that these supportive effects of external sponsorship of autocratic elites will be particularly critical in post-coup scenarios. Autocratic actors often experience surges of foreign attention in the wake of autocratic behaviour, when they find themselves under heightened levels of international scrutiny. When coup plotters face this international scrutiny, they are in a particularly fragile position as they have just seized power and must scramble to establish rule over state institutions and the wider society, often in the face of considerable opposition (Roessler 2011). By contrast, other forms of autocratic behaviour that attract international attention are often carried out by elites who already enjoy the advantages of incumbency. Election fraud, for example, is usually pursued by incumbents who have already established a firm grip on the levers of government and who are seeking to prolong their rule (Hyde 2011; Lehoucq 2003). International sponsors of newly-installed coup leaders can thus play a more critical role in solidifying their rule by protecting and shielding them during a particularly vulnerable period.

In sum, advocates of the democratic coup thesis are correct to suggest that coups are not the same as other forms of authoritarian practice (such as fraud or repression), and that the international politics of coups are distinct from the international politics of these

³ On the role of signals prior to coups, see (Thyne 2010).

⁴ For a similar argument regarding the politics of repression, see (Nepstad 2013)

other practices. However, I depart from the advocates of the democratic coup thesis by questioning whether the particularities of post-coup politics are on balance favourable for democracy. I argue that it would be erroneous to view coups as the midwife of democracy, even in countries that are economically dependent on Western powers. The international politics of post-coup trajectories relate not just to the pro-democratic pressures that coup leaders face, but also to their own strategic importance and the ties they enjoy to supportive international allies. We should not expect coups to lead to democracy, and must examine the full range of international influences on those who illegally seize the power of the state. In the sections that follow I offer empirical support for these arguments. The next section presents descriptive statistics that show the limits of the association between coups and democracy, and highlights the regularity of post-coup authoritarian consolidation. The subsequent sections examine the international sources of post-coup authoritarian resilience in the Fijian and Egyptian cases.

THE DIVERSITY OF POST-COUP TRAJECTORIES

One of the problems with current treatments of the relationship between coups and post-coup regime trajectories is that elections are often equated with the attainment of democracy. Although elections are a central element of democracy and are a crucial step in the process of successful democratization (Lindberg 2009), they are not a sufficient condition for the successful emergence of democracy itself. The spread of elections in the post-Cold War period is not a reliable indicator of the spread of democracy, as many rulers have found ways to use elections to preserve authoritarian forms of rule even while keeping international actors satisfied (Levitsky and Way 2010; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). Even where transitional elections are free and fair, democratic consolidation is far from guaranteed, and many countries struggle to build upon the promise of initial free and fair elections and quickly relapse into some forms of authoritarianism (Kapstein and Converse 2008). Consequently, findings about the relationship between coups and elections cannot easily be translated into findings about coups and democracy, and the language of ‘democratic coups’ is thus highly misleading. While there has been a clear post-Cold War shift away from universal post-coup authoritarianism, coups frequently still give rise to closed autocratic regimes and often pave the way for electoral forms of autocracy that fall short of the minimum standards of democracy.

Taking the analysis of Marinov and Goemans as a starting point, in this section I examine the post-coup political trajectory of all coup countries after 1991, and use descriptive statistics to highlight the extent of post-coup authoritarian resilience in the post-Cold War period. Marinov and Goemans’ central argument is that post-1991 coup countries have had a much greater likelihood of being followed by competitive elections rather than durable authoritarian rule, and that consequently the ‘new generation of coups has been far less harmful for democracy than their historical predecessors’ (Marinov and Goemans 2014). I do not seek to contradict the idea that there has been a shift in patterns after the Cold War, but I show that despite the trend towards post-coup elections, authoritarian rule remains a common outcome in countries that experience coups. Examination of the post-coup politics in all post-1991 cases suggests that coups in these settings are not associated with transitions to durable and high quality democracy in most cases, and that coups still regularly give rise to autocratic regimes.

Table 1 shows the post-1991 coup cases listed in Powell and Thyne’s coup dataset up until 2015 (J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011), as well as a series of measures of their post-coup political trajectories, including the presence or absence of free and fair elections, and their levels of political freedom. Two measures are used to capture the

extent of democracy or autocracy, based on both Polity and Freedom House data. If the democratic coup thesis is correct, we should expect to see a clear relationship between the occurrence of coups and the establishment of democratic regimes. However, no such relationship is apparent, and the evidence presented in the table suggests a number of important findings that raise questions concerning any simple findings about 'democratic coups'.

Table 1: Post-Coup Trajectories, 1991-2015

Country	Year of Coup	Polity 1yr before	Polity 5yrs after	Polity 2014	Freedom House 5yrs after	Freedom House 2014	Elections within 5yrs	Election Year
Lesotho	1991	-7	8	8	PF	F	Fair	1993
Mali	1991	-7	7	5	F	PF	Fair	1992
Haiti	1991	7	7	0	PF	PF	Fair	1995
Thailand	1991	3	9	-3	PF	NF	Fair	1992
Afghanistan	1992	-8	-7	-1	NF	NF	No election	
Sierra Leone	1992	-6	0	7	NF	PF	Fair	1996
Algeria	1992	-2	-3	2	NF	NF	Fair	1995
Nigeria	1993	-5	-1	4	PF	PF	Unfair	1998
Lesotho	1994	8	2	8	PF	F	Fair	1998
Rwanda	1994	-7	-6	-3	NF	NF	No election	
Gambia	1994	8	-5	-5	NF	NF	Fair	1996
Qatar	1995	-10	-10	-10	NF	NF	No election	
Burundi	1996	0	0	6	NF	NF	No election	
Sierra Leone	1996	-7	2	7	PF	PF	Fair	1996
Niger	1996	8	5	4	PF	PF	Fair	1996
Cambodia	1997	1	2	2	NF	NF	Fair	1998
Sierra Leone	1997	4	5	7	PF	PF	Fair	2002
Guinea-Bissau	1999	0	-1	6	PF	PF	Fair	1999
Ivory Coast	1999	-6	0	4	NF	PF	Fair	2000
Comoros	1999	4	6	9	PF	PF	Unfair	2002
Niger	1999	-6	6	4	PF	PF	Fair	1999
Pakistan	1999	7	-5	7	NF	PF	Unfair	2002
Fiji	2000	6	6	2	PF	PF	Fair	2001
Sao Tome	2003	-	-	-	F	F	No election	
Central Afr Rep	2003	5	-1	0	PF	NF	Fair	2005
Guinea-Bissau	2003	5	6	6	PF	PF	Unfair	2004
Mauritania	2005	-6	-2	-2	NF	NF	Unfair	2006
Togo	2005	-2	-2	-2	PF	PF	Fair	2005
Thailand	2006	9	7	-3	PF	NF	Fair	2007
Fiji	2006	6	-4	2	PF	PF	No election	
Guinea	2008	-1	4	4	PF	PF	Fair	2010
Mauritania	2008	4	-2	-2	NF	NF	Fair	2009
Honduras	2009	7	7	7	PF	PF	Fair	2009
Madagascar	2009	7	6	6	PF	PF	Fair	2013
Niger	2010	-3	n/a	4	n/a	PF	Fair	2011
Egypt	2011	-3	n/a	-4	n/a	NF	Fair	2012
Maldives	2012	-	n/a	-	n/a	PF	Fair	2013
Mali	2012	7	n/a	5	n/a	PF	Fair	2013
Guinea-Bissau	2012	6	n/a	6	n/a	PF	Fair	2014
Egypt	2013	-3	n/a	-4	n/a	NF	Unfair	2014
Ukraine	2014	6	n/a	4	n/a	PF	Fair	2014
Thailand	2014	7	n/a	-3	n/a	NF	No election	

Burkina Faso	2014	0	n/a	0	n/a	PF	Fair	2015
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Data Sources: Polity IV 2014 (Polity2 score); Freedom House Freedom in the World 2015 report; Data on coup countries and years based on ‘successful coups’ from Powell and Thyne, ‘Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset.’; Data on election fairness until 2009 based on Marinov and Goemans ‘Coups and Democracy’, and coded by the author after 2009. Scores are ‘-’ for missing data and n/a if not applicable.

First, while the table demonstrates a clear pattern of post-coup elections across most cases, the trend is not universal. A small number of countries that experienced coups in the post-1991 period refrained from holding any elections within five years of the coup, including Afghanistan after its 1992 coup, Rwanda after 1994, and Fiji after 2006. Several others held elections that were not free and fair, including Pakistan after the Musharraf coup of 1999 (flawed elections in 2002) and Mauritania after its 2005 coup (flawed elections in 2006). While most of the 43 coups between 1991-2015 were followed by free and fair elections, a significant minority of 12 held no, or only flawed, elections. Post-Cold War coups have thus given rise to many closed authoritarian regimes.

A second feature of the data concerns the levels of political freedom that can be found in the set of coup cases. Using both Polity and Freedom House data, it is possible to determine whether post-1991 coup countries have experienced transitions to democratic regimes, or have instead consolidated authoritarian forms of rule. An analysis of the Freedom House status for each country five years after the coup is not particularly encouraging. To consider this measure, it is necessary to restrict the sample to those coups between 1991-2009 in order to allow a five-year gap to assess the Freedom House verdict (Freedom House’s 2015 scores cover the 2014 calendar year). Of the 34 coups that took place between 1991-2009, in only two cases was the country rated as Free within five years of the coup, while in 20 cases the country was rated as Partly Free after five years and 12 were rated Not Free. Even taking a longer perspective, the pattern is remarkably similar and not particularly encouraging. Of the 29 countries that experienced coups between 1991-2014, and are thus included in the 2015 Freedom in the World report, only two were rated as ‘Free’ (Lesotho and Sao Tome and Principe). Sixteen were rated as Partly Free, and 11 were rated as Not Free.

The evidence from Polity presents a more optimistic picture, but still shows a clear trend in which most countries that experience a coup struggle to achieve stable democratic rule and instead consolidate some form of autocratic regime. Polity scores are only available until 2014, and no Polity scores are available for two small island countries that experienced coups (the Maldives and Sao Tome & Principe). The Polity scale runs from -10 to 10, and Polity recommends scoring cases from -10 to -6 as autocracies, -5 to 5 as anocracies, and 6-10 as democracies. Of the 33 coups between 1991-2009 for which Polity has scores, only eleven (one third) achieve scores of 6 or above (representing democracy) within five years. Three were autocratic, and the remaining 19 were anocracies. Just under half (16) were scored at 0 or below five years after the coup. Turning to the longer-term measure to assess the current status of these coup countries, the picture is broadly similar. Of the 28 countries for which Polity has 2014 scores, nine are democracies, one is an autocracy and 18 are anocracies. Polity data thus suggest a pattern in which the majority of countries that experience coups struggle to move beyond limited levels of democratic rule, and many fall far short of the threshold of democracy. While Polity offers a slightly more encouraging picture than Freedom House (more countries in the top category, and fewer in the bottom) both sets of data suggest that the post-1991 coup experience has clearly not helped usher in a wave of stable democracies.

Comparison of Polity figures before and after each coup also reinforces the limits of the democratic coup thesis. While several countries registered significant positive

changes in their Polity score when comparing the year prior to the coup with the five year post-coup score (e.g. Lesotho and Mali after their 1991 coups) many countries also experienced significant decreases (Gambia after 1994, Fiji after 2006) and many others registered little or no change over time. On average, the countries that experienced coups between 1991-2009 only experienced a rise of 0.8 in Polity levels after five years, a result that undermines the contention that coups are a force for democratic development. Thinking in terms of possible counterfactual scenarios, the pre- and post-coup trends also suggest that while some countries would not have achieved their subsequent levels of democracy without the catalysing effects of their coups, many others would have been better off in democratic terms (or largely unchanged) had their coups never taken place. This lack of any clear trend towards of post-coup democratic gain is contrary to the expectations raised by the democratic coup thesis.

Third, a striking feature of the table is that several countries appear multiple times, suggesting that coup countries struggle to maintain post-coup regimes without subsequently experiencing another coup. Young democracies are often highly fragile (Kapstein and Converse 2008), and the figures show that many of the post-1991 post-coup regimes succumbed to subsequent coups within a short number of years. Nine countries that held post-coup elections after 1991 went on to experience at least one more coup in the wake of those elections. These multiple-coup cases were (with coup years in parenthesis): Egypt (2011 and 2013), Fiji (2000 and 2006), Guinea-Bissau (1999, 2003 and 2012), Lesotho (1991 and 1994), Mali (1991 and 2012), Mauritania (2005 and 2008), Niger (1996, 1999 and 2010), Sierra Leone (1992, 1996 and 1997), and Thailand (1991, 2006 and 2014). Far from ushering in stable democracy, the initial coups in the nine repeat offenders failed to usher stable regimes of any kind.

Overall, therefore, the trends in post-coup politics after 1991 do not suggest we live in an age of 'democratic coups'. While many coups are followed by some form of free and fair election within five years, the trend is far from universal. Coup leaders still often cling to power and coups regularly give rise to new forms of autocratic rule, often with the use of façade elections. Coups are no longer the near-certain death sentence for democracy that they were during the Cold War years, but authoritarian resilience still remains a common feature of post-coup politics. The following sections examine two case studies to illustrate the role that international politics plays in fostering post-coup authoritarian consolidation: the 2013 coup in Egypt and the 2006 coup in Fiji. The former was characterized by shallow 'enforcement' by the United States, as well as robust sponsorship by powerful states within the region. The latter case featured intense enforcement efforts by Western powers that were nonetheless offset by a surge in Chinese economic and diplomatic sponsorship. Both cases highlight the ways in which permissive and supportive international environments can reinforce the position of authoritarian rulers.

US POLICY AND EGYPT'S 2013 COUP

The role that international sponsorship plays in the consolidation of post-coup regimes is clearly illustrated by the international reaction to the Egyptian coup of 2013. The Arab uprisings of 2011 led to the swift collapse of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, but the aftermath of the uprisings did not ultimately lead to a transition to democratic rule. The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi was elected to office in the country's first free and fair presidential elections in 2012, but quickly clashed with both the military and the judiciary (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015). After public protests mobilized against Morsi, the military intervened and forcefully removed him from office in July 2013. A major crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood followed in which

its main political party was banned and its key leaders arrested (Kirkpatrick 2013). Presidential elections in 2014 brought to power the man who led the coup, former head of the armed forces, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

The international response to the 2013 coup varied, and reflected the diverse linkage spectrum that Egypt enjoys on the international stage. Within Africa, there was widespread condemnation, and Egypt was suspended from the African Union under its rules governing the unconstitutional removal of leaders from power (it was re-admitted one year later) (Reuters 2013). Yet the international reaction elsewhere was more sanguine, and its most influential international partners and donors largely backed the regime. Consequently, although the broader international reaction was contested, with the presence of both critics and supporters, the international actors that counted most (Egypt's principal donors) created a largely supportive international environment. The US in particular, one of Egypt's biggest donors and a long-standing political ally, offered only limited criticism and punitive measures in response to the coup, and its overall policy was broadly supportive of the military's actions. The US had a number of strategic motivations that informed this policy. Egypt had long represented a strategically important partner in furthering several of the US's interests in the region, including the security of Israel and containment of Islamist political movements (Chase, Hill, and Kennedy 1996; Sharp 2014). Over time, the two countries had developed extensive linkages at the highest levels, forming 'a network of common interests, values and practices' (Brownlee 2012, 9). The militaries of both countries have close ties, and many of Egypt's senior military figures, including Sisi, were trained or educated in the US (AFP 2013; Carlstrom 2014).

As a result of these close ties and interests, the US remained a largely supportive ally to the new authorities in the wake of the coup. Washington sought to avoid triggering potentially damaging punitive measures against the regime, and also offered a series of diplomatic statements that sent clear signals of support. Under US law, US aid money cannot be 'expended to finance directly any assistance to any country whose duly elected Head of Government is deposed by military coup or decree.'⁵ In the wake of Morsi's forced removal from office, there was an intense debate within Washington about whether to describe the events as a coup. US Secretary of State John Kerry described the issue as 'complex and difficult', and argued that the law would have to be balanced with the threat of 'civil war' that existed before the coup, suggesting that mitigating circumstances might apply (Reuters 2015). The White House Press Secretary explicitly cited US interests in explaining its initial policy response, stating that 'it would not be in the best interests of the United States to immediately change our assistance programs to Egypt' (ABC News 2013). Ultimately, the administration avoided characterizing Morsi's overthrow as a coup, and thus shielded the regime from automatic and wide-ranging sanctions. In the early weeks after Morsi's ousting, the US administration also offered a number of supportive signals from the highest level. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel made regular calls to Sisi to reassure him about the solidity of the relationship between the two countries (Carlstrom 2014). In some of the most striking language from the US government during the period, Secretary of State John Kerry commented of the military that 'in effect, they were restoring democracy' (Bradley 2013). The equation of Morsi's forceful overthrow and detention with the restoration of democratic rule constituted one of the clearest international endorsements of the military's actions.

After the extent of the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood became clear, including a brutal assault on protesters on Rabaa square in August 2013, the US did move to restrict some military assistance. Yet this was primarily based on criticism of the use of repressive violence rather than coup itself, and it was also presented in

⁵ Section 508 of the Foreign Operations Appropriation Act. See also (Shannon et al. 2015)

cautious rather than condemnatory terms. The US withheld delivery of military hardware, including helicopters and warplanes, as well as the disbursement of \$260m for the Egyptian budget (while leaving counterterrorism assistance and other financial support in place). However the administration also clearly signalled the temporary nature of the restrictions, with one senior official quoted as saying, “This is not meant to be permanent; this is meant to be the opposite” (Gordon and Lander 2013). Further diplomatic support was quickly forthcoming. Rather than isolating the regime, in November 2013, a month after the restrictions were put in place, Kerry made a high-profile visit to Cairo, where he met with General Sisi and praised the military for pursuing its declared ‘roadmap’ to democracy. Kerry also sent further signals about the sympathetic position of the US administration, stating that the cut in assistance ‘is not a punishment’, and calling it a ‘small issue’ compared to the two countries’ common interests (DeYoung 2013).

When the arms freeze was lifted in March 2015, a year after Sisi has assumed power through flawed elections, no effort was made to suggest the Egypt had made the kind of democratic progress that had initially been a requirement of lifting the restrictions, and the decision was justified with reference to national security interests (the timing coincided with deteriorating security conditions in Egypt and the wider region, including violence in the Sinai, the rise of ISIS and the decline of security in Libya) (Baker 2015).

The US policy thus fell far short of full democratic enforcement, and the administration sent a number clear signals that it was prepared to work with and support the coup leaders. If post-coup trajectories are determined in part by the fear of enforcement from major donors, Egypt’s post-coup leaders would have had little to worry about regarding the long-term support of the United States.

The international story of Egypt’s post-coup trajectory also includes a role for even more supportive international allies, who offered full and unconditional diplomatic and material sponsorship. Several Gulf countries offered immediate and unequivocal support and ensured that Egypt remained part of a powerful ‘in-group’ of sympathetic states. Saudi Arabia was quick to applaud the Egyptian military in the immediate aftermath of the coup, issuing a statement offering congratulations to the new interim leader, Adly Mansour, and directly praising the military for managing to ‘save Egypt’ (Stuster 2016). Saudi Arabia had been a long-standing supporter of the Mubarak regime, and viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to the Saudi’s preferred model of political control both domestically and within the region. A strong Muslim Brotherhood administration in Egypt challenged Saudi Arabia’s desire to be the leading power in the Middle East, and also offered an alternative model of election-based Islamist rule that was viewed in Riyadh as a potential threat to monarchical rule at home (Hassan 2015; Ennis and Momani 2013).

This diplomatic sponsorship was complemented with a large spike in material assistance. Within a week of the coup, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates jointly pledged a total of \$12billion to Egypt (Khan and Lebaron 2015). The Saudi regime had significantly reduced aid to Egypt during Morsi’s presidency, so the swift offer of a new and generous economic package starkly illustrated the political nature of the assistance (Worth 2013). It represented support for a particular set of Egyptian elites, rather than Egypt in general. The package offered crucial support at a time when Egypt was struggling economically, as it sought to finance its expensive public subsidies despite limited domestic economic productivity (Malik and McCormick 2013). Yet while the economic support from the Gulf helped address Egypt’s chronic economic problems, it also sent a clear message that any punitive action by Egypt’s western donors (including the US) would be offset and compensated for by its regional allies. The countries attached no conditionality to the aid package, and redoubled their efforts after Sisi’s election to president, offering another \$12billion

package in 2015 (Kirkpatrick 2015). These figures dwarf the \$1.3m in military assistance offered annually by the US, and highlight the potential for non-Western allies to undercut any leverage that western actors might wish to apply. In the two years after the coup, total Gulf aid amounted to \$23billion compared to \$2.8billion from the US (Wehrey 2015, 76).

Egypt thus received a broad range of diplomatic and material support from its most important and influential allies in the wake of the 2013 coup. Even though it was subjected to some enforcement measures, they were all temporary, and mostly either half-hearted (in the case of the more critical US policies) or relatively pain-free (for example, AU suspension for a single year). By contrast, Egypt received much more influential diplomatic and material sponsorship, not least in the form of a massive injection of funds from Gulf allies in the immediate aftermath of the coup. Far from being isolated and exposed because of its dependence on external actors, Egypt's post-coup leaders were praised and kept afloat by its most influential donors, facilitating the consolidation of authoritarian rule in the ensuing months and years. The following section explores a similar dynamic in external support for post-coup authoritarianism in Fiji.

ELECTION-FREE POLITICS IN POST-COUP FIJI

Fiji has had a history of coups, but its 2006 coup was noticeable for its unusual aftermath – the principal coup leader, head of the armed forces Commodore Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama, resisted domestic and international pressure and refused to hold elections until 2014 (elections he comfortably won). The analysis below explores Fiji's post-coup political trajectory after 2006, and highlights in particular the ways in which supportive international influences helped Bainimarama to consolidate power even in the face of vocal and costly international condemnation.

Formerly a British colony, Fiji achieved independence in 1970 but struggled to consolidate a stable political system due to political tensions between the country's indigenous Fijian population and its large Fiji Indian population. Fiji's earlier coups reflected unease within the indigenous Fijian community at the prospect of political Fiji Indian involvement in government (Firth 2012). The 2006 coup differed from the earlier instances in that the military stepped in to remove a government that was led and supported by the indigenous Fijian community. The rationale for the coup was predicated on a stated desire to move beyond the traditional ethnic tensions within the country. Bainimarama justified the coup on the basis that Fijian politics needed to be transformed in a way that would eradicate ethnic-based politics and lead to new political culture based on multiracialism, good governance and freedom from corruption. It was presented as a coup that would end the 'coup culture' in Fiji and usher in a new political landscape that would be free of the ethnic divisions of the past (Fraenkel and Firth 2009).

However, despite initial promises of a 'roadmap' to elections, Bainimarama assumed the role of Prime Minister and retained it without elections until 2014, when he retired from the armed forces to fight, and win, in a free and fair vote (Quoted in Fraenkel 2009). This lengthy abrogation of democratic rule, which included a series of broken promises, came in the face of extensive domestic and international pressure. The international reaction to the coup had been swift and decisive. Australia, New Zealand and the European Union were Fiji's largest donors and all were forceful critics of the coup.⁶ Australia and New Zealand both quickly imposed a range of sanctions, including robust travel bans on military personnel and members of the interim

⁶ ODA figures from Fijian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/trade-policy/international-cooperation/oda-trend>

administration, as well as the suspension of new development aid. New Zealand imposed visa restrictions on Fijian workers, cancelled military training for Fijian soldiers and halted the approval of new development assistance schemes (Lal 2007). The European Union also sought to put the new post-coup regime under pressure. In April 2007, the EU set down a series of conditions for further dialogue with Fiji under the ACP-EC Cotonou Agreement that covers EU development programmes in the region. The EU sought assurances that there would be democratic elections before March 2009, as well as evidence of respect for human rights, rule of law and judicial independence. Seemingly in response to this sustained international pressure, Bainimarama made a public commitment in October 2007 that elections would be held in March 2009 in line with international demands. However, by mid-2008 he had abandoned the commitment and Fiji thus became one of the few countries in the post-war period to eschew any form of elections in the years after experiencing a coup.

Fiji's experience suggests both domestic and international sources of post-coup authoritarian resilience. In domestic terms, the new regime sought to combine its efforts at co-optation with strategies designed to marginalize critical voices and institutions. Bainimarama relied in part on the acquiescence of the Fijian President, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, who addressed the nation and endorsed the coup, stating that Bainimarama had acted in the interests of the nation and that the coup was 'valid in law'. Bainimarama also succeeded in recruiting senior figures in the Fijian Labour Party, which largely represented the Fiji Indian community and was willing to support Bainimarama on the grounds that his coup had ousted a government that was deeply antagonistic to Fiji Indian interests (Fraenkel 2006, 45). The regime also moved against potential elite and public threats. It marginalized and ultimately disbanded the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), one of the major institutions of political authority and legitimacy for the ethnic Fijian chiefly system (Norton 2009, 97/8; Pearlman 2012). It also significantly increased the use of repression on civil and political liberties. The constitution was abrogated and a state of emergency was introduced that lasted until 2012 under 'Public Emergency Regulations'. Media freedom was strictly curtailed, the right to assembly was restricted and opposition actors were targeted with politically motivated court cases. Over time, efforts at elite co-optation were abandoned, and two former Prime Ministers were pursued in the courts, sending a clear signal of the limits of political opposition (Human Rights Watch 2012; Fiji One 2014; *Telegraph* 2012).

These domestic strategies were not pursued in isolation, however, and Bainimarama also sought to use the international environment in ways that would support his rule. Despite its isolation from the West, Fiji's authoritarian resilience can in part be explained by the diversity of its international linkage spectrum, and especially its ties to China. Fiji was not just reliant and dependent on Western actors, but also had a long history of close relations with China before 2006. Fiji was the first Pacific Island country to recognize the PRC in 1975, and it is an open advocate of the 'One China' policy (although it retains some diplomatic ties with Taiwan) (Yang 2011). Fiji had also sought to strengthen ties with China after each of its previous coups, and this strategy (dubbed the 'Look North' policy) complemented China's own increasing interest in acting as a regional power within the Asia Pacific (Tarte 2010).

After the 2006 coup, Fiji actively sought to cultivate Chinese assistance, and Bainimarama immediately moved to reinvigorate its Look North policy (New York Times 2007). China responded by offering support rather than condemnation, and used a combination of tools to bolster and shield the post-coup regime in Fiji. A statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry's deputy director suggested not only support for the post-coup government, but also offered a barely disguised criticism of Fiji's western critics: 'We have always respected Fiji's status as an independent nation and we have called on the other countries to do the same and reconsider their attitudes towards Fiji and the current situation in the country' (*Fiji Times* 2007).

China supplemented diplomatic support with increased economic assistance. In 2005, the year before the coup, China pledged only US\$1million to Fiji. Aid and loan pledges jumped to US\$167million in 2007, the year after the coup. Given a steep decline in Australian and New Zealand aid, China helped ‘fill the void’ that was created by Western sanctions (*The Australian* 2009). Consistent with Beijing’s aid and development policy across the globe, it has refrained from publicly criticizing the Fijian government for its lack of democracy and did not seek to make its economic support conditional on election-related progress (Halper 2010). In the following years, China and Fiji’s relationship continued to tighten. China offered a \$135m loan in 2009 and introduced direct flights from Hong Kong in a move that would boost Fijian tourism (McGeough 2009). The overall shift in Chinese financial support to Fiji after 2006 fundamentally changed Fiji’s international economic relations. In the years prior to 2006, Australia and the EU alternated as Fiji’s largest donor, and China was a negligible player. In the year 2006, Australia gave \$17.4m, the EU gave \$8.4m and China gave just \$1.4m.⁷ Between 2006-2013, however, China was Fiji’s largest donor, pushing Australia into second place (Lowry Institute 2015; *The Economist* 2015).

Fiji’s diplomatic sponsorship in the wake of the coup was also significant. Fiji received a significant and high profile visit from vice-President Xi Jinping in February 2009. At the time, Xi was widely (and correctly) expected to become China’s next leader and his visit thus amounted to an endorsement of the post-coup regime from the highest levels of Chinese government. Diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks have shown that Australia sought to prevent Xi’s visit and appealed to China to join international efforts in isolating the Bainimarama regime. Instead, Xi met directly with Bainimarama and signed off on a number of development assistance deals (McLean 2011). Although the diplomatic reports suggest that Xi did urge Bainimarama to hold elections, no conditions were placed on the assistance deals that were finalized (Wikileaks 2009b; Wikileaks 2009a). By 2013, Bainimarama was expressing gratitude to China for development assistance in a wide range of areas (Bainimarama 2014).

Chinese motives were not purely altruistic or normative. During these years Fiji became a focal point in the ‘soft balancing’ policies at work in the South Pacific region, where China engaged in efforts to balance US, Australian and New Zealand influence in the region not through military maneuvering and contestation but through carefully cultivated economic and diplomatic alliances (Lanteigne 2012). Consequently, China’s support for the Bainimarama regime should not be seen as an exercise in ideologically-driven autocracy promotion (Tansey 2016b). Yet the implications of its unconditional and increasing support for Fiji during the crucial years in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 coup were highly significant for authoritarian resilience. By giving Bainimarama diplomatic and material assistance, China bolstered the regime at precisely the time when its Western partners were seeking to put pressure on it. Chinese policy allowed the regime to reinforce its claims to legitimacy by pointing to a powerful international ally, while also softening the economic pain associated with the new sanctions regime. Consequently, the story of post-coup authoritarian resilience in Fiji is not purely a story of ‘strong-man rule’ and domestic political maneuvering. Fiji benefited from robust international sponsorship in a way that compensated for its dependence on Western actors, and Bainimarama’s post-coup tenure was bolstered and shielded by his non-Western international allies.

CONCLUSION

⁷ ODA figures from Fijian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/trade-policy/international-cooperation/oda-trend>

The politics of post-Cold War coups is systematically different from what has gone before. During the Cold War, coups were highly likely to initiate long-term and closed authoritarian rule. By contrast, recent coups are much more likely to be followed by competitive elections than their Cold War predecessors. Yet authoritarian resilience is still a feature of post-coup politics, and international sponsorship plays an important role in facilitating post-coup authoritarianism.

In this article, I have sought to explore the relationship between coups and autocracy in greater detail, and to caution against any undue optimism about the rise of the ‘democratic coup’ and the role of international democratizing pressures. I do not seek to contradict existing findings that post-Cold War coups are more likely to be followed by competitive elections. Rather, I make two separate arguments. First, I show that while most post-1991 coups are indeed followed by competitive elections within five years, a significant proportion hold only flawed elections or no elections at all. Even among those countries that embrace open electoral competition, many struggle to consolidate democracy without backsliding to authoritarian rule and experiencing further government overthrows. Overall, while coups are increasingly associated with post-coup elections, the pattern is not universal and post-coup authoritarianism is a common feature. We do not live in an age of ‘democratic coups’.

Second, I argue that the variation in post-coup trajectories can be explained in significant part by the variation in international environment that coup countries experience, which in turn is rooted in each individual country’s strategic importance and linkage spectrum. Although there has been a considerable increase in democratizing pressures since the end of the Cold War, the international environment remains far from constant and countries regularly face a diverse spectrum of linkage relationships. These may include close ties to committed and forceful democracy promoters, but can also involve ties to democracies who are willing relax their democratic conditionality policies to achieve alternative interests, as well as non-democratic states who have little interest or commitment to promoting democratic rule. Even where states are economically dependent on Western democracies, it does not follow that they will necessarily face pro-democratic pressures in the wake of unconstitutional seizures of power. Democracy promoters can sometimes exact powerful and transformative pressure on the countries they target. Yet often they refrain from using the leverage they have, and prioritize strategic over ideological goals by actively supporting autocratic incumbents. Even when democracy promoters seek to wield influence to undermine post-coup authorities, their impact is structured by the role of other international actors who wish to sponsor post-coup regimes. International autocratic sponsors help consolidate authoritarianism in a number of ways, legitimizing coup leaders and their actions, blocking international sanctions, and offering direct material assistance to bolster the capacity of post-coup authorities. Acknowledging and addressing the role of international autocratic sponsors is essential if we are to gain a full and proper understanding of variety of post-coup political trajectories in the post-Cold War world.

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