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Trading coups for civil war
The strategic logic of tolerating rebellion

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This paper investigates civil conflict as a product of the survival strategies of African leaders. Specifically, the paper offers a theory of risk substitution that predicts coup-fearing leaders will undermine the military effectiveness of the state when making an effort to extend their own tenure. While 'coup-proofing' practices have often been noted as contributors to political survival, considerably less attention has been paid to the influence of these strategies on other forms of conflict. Utilising data from a number of cross-national datasets, the analyses show that having a higher number of 'coup-proofing' counterweights significantly worsens a state's civil conflict prospects. A brief consideration of multiple episodes of conflict further suggests that in addition to coup-proofing undermining the counterinsurgency capacity of the state, some leaders are simply indifferent to – or can even potentially benefit from – the existence of an insurgency.

Keywords military coups, civil war, coup-proofing, political survival, security

Introduction

The inability of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to combat the M23 rebels in late 2012 paralleled the country's history of struggling with counterinsurgency. Such trends were seen with the poor performance of the Forces Armées Zaïrois (FAZ) during the Shaba conflicts and the first Congo War. This paper hints that these successive failures are not a coincidence, and are not, as often portrayed in the media, merely the products of rebels having access to loot-able financial resources such as gemstones.[1] Studies of civil war, particularly in the greed versus grievance debate, have often paid substantial attention to the rebel side of conflict at the expense of state- or leader-centric explanations for civil war. This is an important distinction, as a self-serving policy of political survival would seem to be a contributing factor to continued strife in the eastern DRC and beyond.

Following the M23's dramatic gains in late 2012 and Mali's coup earlier in the year, James Fearon queried:

> Why don't these rulers, in their own self-interest … build crack units, presidential guards, or strong and loyal army divisions that would protect their hold on power against two dozen putschists, or a hundred or couple [of] thousand rebels armed with rifles and maybe some mortars?[2]

Fearon further noted that the 'relevant poli sci literatures'[3] fail to adequately explain these trends. Though perhaps in its infancy, there is a growing body of literature that attempts to explain the dynamics that are described – literature that would seem to specifically account for many of the trends witnessed throughout Africa's post-independence era. This is especially true for the DRC.

This paper describes a risk substitution hypothesis, which argues that leaders will combat the likeliest means of their removal with policies that can potentially increase their likelihood of being removed through other means. Specifically, I argue that leaders who are fearful of a military coup will adopt survival strategies, commonly referred as 'coup-proofing', which will actually increase the likelihood of the onset of civil conflict. The paper proceeds with a brief discussion of the different threats that leaders face, a review of scholarly literature related to negative consequences of coup-proofing, a discussion of the implications of coup-proofing for civil conflict, and finally a multivariate assessment of the hypothesis. The results strongly support the contention that coup-proofing, while undermining coups, significantly increases the likelihood that regimes will become more vulnerable to civil conflict.

Divergent priorities

Leaders face threats to their survival from sources as diverse as foreign invaders, popular uprisings, military coups, armed insurgents, and even an electorate. Leaders would, no doubt, prefer to have a blanket policy that would stamp out any threat to their continued tenure. Unfortunately, the multitude of threats and the different actors that a leader must consider will force him or her to make trade-offs. In the end, a policy that increases security against one set of actors might decrease security against another, as executives engage in a balancing act for political survival. Peter Feaver, for example, has pointed to a civil-military 'problematique' in which efforts to increase the international security of the state by building up military prowess can actually increase the likelihood of a praetorian threat to the executive.[4] Leaders thus find themselves mired in a paradox in which a weak military can leave them vulnerable to invasion or civil war, while a strong military could expedite their exit through a coup d'état. This paper presents evidence that efforts to inhibit coups increase the risk of civil war as a general trend.

To return to the first part of Fearon's query: leaders *do* in fact take money and build 'crack units, presidential guards, or strong and loyal army divisions'. Aside from obvious historical and contemporary examples, a large cross-national study by Belkin and Schofer has quantitatively demonstrated that regimes at higher risk of a coup possess more coup-proofing units.[5] More recently, Pilster and Bohmelt have shown that authoritarian regimes, which are presumably more likely to fear a coup than democracies, are statistically more likely to have higher numbers of these organisations,[6] while Jonathan Powell showed that a stronger

structural coup-proofing apparatus significantly reduced the likelihood of coups being attempted, as well as the prospects of a coup's success.[7]

This literature suggests that coup-fearing leaders will build up their coup-proofing apparatus, election-fearing leaders have little utility for coup-proofing, and coup-proofing can successfully reduce coup activity. So in contrast to the generalisation that many leaders are failing to build up their security apparatus, there is considerable evidence that leaders have already tried to stabilise their governments against coups. It would then seem paradoxical that in spite of concerted coup-proofing efforts and the decline in frequency of military coups in Africa, civil wars such as the M23 rebellion continue to plague the region. This paper suggests that this trend is because leaders have only built up a specific aspect of their security apparatus: its counter-coup capabilities. Less attention is given to the *regular* armed forces that will ultimately be tasked with counterinsurgency.

Coup-proofing and military effectiveness

To address the second part of Fearon's question, it is important to clarify that efforts to address the first concern (coups) can *increase* vulnerability to the second concern (rebellion) by changing the balance of capabilities between the state and its dissidents. First, coup-proofing increases the capacity of the opposition to engage in conflict against the regime. Philip Roessler, for example, shows that leaders in Africa have increased the capacity of non-state actors to mobilise when they purge disloyal elements from the government.[8] If there is one shortcoming of his analysis, it could be that the influence of these purges is understated. Due to data availability, Roessler ultimately relies on the exclusion of ethnic groups from *political* power. Previous access to the government will no doubt make a population more powerful than the typical non-state group, but this dynamic could be even stronger when we consider survival strategies that influence the capabilities of the *military*. Quantitative analysis on military purges is all but impossible due to data accessibility and reliability. Leaders, and even military heads, often have incentives to obfuscate the composition of their militaries. President Milton Obote, for example, lamented that not even he knew the size and composition of the Ugandan military when led by Idi Amin.[9] Regardless of the suitability of quantitative assessment, such purges and other strategies that target the military are clearly of crucial importance to the study of political stability in Africa, particularly with regard to its civil wars.

Second, a growing literature shows that coup-proofing also decreases the military capabilities of the state.[10] For example, Powell has shown that coup-proofed militaries are less likely to be utilised in international conflict,[11] while Pilster and Bohmelt demonstrate that more heavily coup-proofed armies suffer a higher casualty rate than their adversaries on the battlefield.[12] A number of causes have been linked to these trends. First, fractionalisation of the armed forces will create coordination challenges, just as they will for coup conspiracies. These divisions are then exacerbated by further efforts of leaders to explicitly forbid inter-branch communication. Muammar Gaddafi 'frequently and unexpectedly' rotated and purged command positions in the Libyan army, even proscribing the regular military from forming division-level commands, which had to be created 'on an *ad hoc* basis in the field' against Chad in the 1980s.[13] Gaddafi's actions resulted in a regular army in which 'concerted' action was 'nearly impossible', and accounts of the Chadian conflict fail to report 'a single mention of Libyan forces conducting a tactical counterattack'.[14] Such trends have also been witnessed in

the context of civil conflict, such as the Zairean Air Force's accidental bombing of FAZ ground soldiers during the Shaba conflicts.

Third, coup-proofing further reduces military capabilities by reducing materiel or redirecting it to the coup-proofing apparatus. For example, Siaka Stevens was able to peacefully retain power for seventeen years in Sierra Leone while relying on a paramilitary organisation for his personal survival. While his Internal Security Unit (ISU) was given 'special attention' for years – with Cuban advisers, modern weaponry, and financial spoils – Stevens would eventually disarm the regular armed forces.[15] In other cases, armies might be provided with sophisticated arms, but lack the training or upkeep to effectively utilise them. Returning to the war with Chad, the Libyans deployed 'far more advanced and far more powerful weaponry … but were crushed none-theless'.[16] The FAZ under Mobutu similarly showed 'costly equipment [that] proved of little value' in combat.[17] Henk and Rupiya's assessment of African military establishments concludes that such trends are due to two reasons.[18] First, financial resources are frequently dedicated to officer allowances, as illustrated with the estimated 68 per cent of military expenditures that went to personnel allowances in Zimbabwe. While perhaps effective at keeping otherwise disgruntled officers in the barracks, high salaries will of course have limited utility in counterinsurgency. Second, funding that is actually dedicated to procuring arms is often done for merely symbolic purposes, usually in an effort to show a façade of modernisation of the armed forces or to increase their prestige.[19] So while Henk and Rupiya have suggested that Robert Mugabe has a 'relatively sophisticated procurement establishment',[20] most of Zimbabwe's military vehicles are actually inoperable.

Fourth, coup-proofing brings with it a reduction in the quality of the regular armed forces. Sekou Touré, through building up his National Militia, would appoint illiterate soldiers as commanding officers in the Guinean Army.[21] Siaka Stevens, in the extremely common practice of ethnically motivated recruitment, preferred the Limba and Temne and, regardless of military competence, readily purged anyone with suspect loyalty from Sierra Leone's armed forces. Given the combination of capability-reducing aspects of Stevens' survival strategies, it is no surprise that the state would eventually become susceptible to rebellion.

Accompanying these dynamics is an observed unwillingness to utilise the coup-proofing apparatus for counter-insurgency measures. Mobutu's armed counterweights such as the Division Spéciale Présidentielle (DSP), the Garde Civile and the gendarmerie possessed better training and resources than the regular army, although he steadfastly refused to deploy these paratroopers during Shaba or the first Congo War. The Garde Républicaine fits this mould under Kabila. Under both leaders, the regular armed forces have displayed a remarkable inability to wage counterinsurgency operations while the more skilled paramilitary is kept removed from fighting.

These factors lead to the hypothesis to be tested in the following analyses: heightened dedication to coup-proofing is expected to significantly increase the likelihood of civil conflict. The following sections describe and test an empirical assessment of the theory.

Data and methods

The analyses ultimately include yearly data from 49 independent states from northern and sub-Saharan Africa from 1970 to 2000, with country-year acting as the unit of analysis. Civil conflict is defined as a 'contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory or

both where the use of armed force between two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year', as reported in the Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD).[22] One of these parties must be the government and the first year of a new conflict acts as the year of onset. The operationalisation of the measure is dichotomous, considering whether or not at least one armed conflict began in the year.

The 'effective organisations' measure developed by Pilster and Bohmelt is used as a proxy for a state's degree of coup-proofing. Their consideration of coup-proofing represents a substantial improvement over Belkin and Schofer's seminal offering by determining ground organisations that are legitimately capable of deterring a coup attempt, generally captured by presidential guards or gendarmes. Navies or air forces that lack ground soldiers, of course, could be said to have little chance at either undertaking a successful coup or combating one.

It is also necessary to control for a number of other factors that could potentially influence the onset of coups or civil conflict. The lead of Fearon and Laitin is followed in modelling the onset of civil conflict. Additional control variables correspond to their models and are in fact taken from their replication files. *Polity* accounts for a state's level of democratisation. Low *GDP per capita* (logged) has been argued to act as a determinant of civil war for a number of reasons. These causes range from the ability of insurgencies to recruit from poorer classes, to improving the 'state military and police strength relative to the potential insurgents'.[23] An advantage of the current argument is to account for a mechanism (coup-proofing) that can actually *decrease* the relative power of the state. The natural log of *population* is also included, as a larger populace has been argued to increase the pool of potential recruits as well as increase the costs of government monitoring. *Terrain* captures the percentage of mountainous terrain within a state's borders and can reduce the ability of central authorities to project power. Countries with *non-contiguous* territories (e.g., Angola and Cabinda) have also been noted to be particularly conflict prone due to the separation of the territory from the state's power centre. *Oil exporters* are states whose exports are at least 30 per cent oil. The measure has been an oft-cited contributor to civil conflict, particularly in literature concerning the resource curse. *Instability* captures a polity score change of at least 2 units and can capture 'disorganization and weakness' of the state.[24] *Ethnic* and *religious* fractionalisation intends to capture the potential for identity-based hostility. Finally, the existence of prior *incidence* of conflict in the previous year seeks to account for a new conflict's dependence on a prior event.

There are, however, two notable changes from the original Fearon and Laitin model. First, *new state*, a variable that captures whether a state is in its first two years of independence, is omitted due to perfect colinearity. Second, a control for a *coup* in the current year is included.[25] Coups can act both as the first shots fired in a civil conflict, or as a contributing factor to a future civil war (e.g., 2002 Cote d'Ivoire). Further, 'bloody' coups with a body count of at least 25 deaths can in fact be classified as a civil conflict in the Armed Conflict Dataset. Clayton Thyne, for example, has urged scholars to include coups as a control variable for civil war studies for just these reasons.[26] Coups are considered to be 'illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive', as defined by Powell and Thyne.[27] This dataset is particularly attractive given their effort to distinguish coup activity from other forms of anti-regime actions, including civil war. This variable is a dichotomous measure that considers whether or not at least one coup was attempted during the year.

Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, logistic regression is employed as an estimator.[28] A variety of steps are taken to consider the robustness of the models, with each step reflected in each model in Table 1. Additional specifications consider standard errors

Table 1 The influence of coup-proofing on civil conflict onset in Africa, 1970–2000

	Country cluster	Robust/White SE	Bootstrap	Jackknife	Rare events	RE, clustered	None
Coup-proofing	0,549**	0,549**	0,549*	0,549*	0,548**	0,548**	0,549*
	(0,250)	(0,279)	(0,292)	(0,294)	(0,275)	(0,247)	(0,282)
Coup attempt	1,724***	1,724***	1,724***	1,724***	1,707***	1,707***	1,724***
	(0,475)	(0,462)	(0,526)	(0,498)	(0,457)	(0,469)	(0,459)
Prior conflict	−0,606	−0,606	−0,606	−0,606	−0,533	−0,533	−0,606
	(0,460)	(0,459)	(0,526)	(0,507)	(0,454)	(0,455)	(0,522)
Polity	0,058*	0,058*	0,058	0,058	0,061*	0,061*	0,058
	(0,032)	(0,035)	(0,037)	(0,038)	(0,034)	(0,032)	(0,038)
GDP per capita	−0,469	−0,469	−0,469	−0,469	−0,418	−0,418	−0,469
	(0,327)	(0,362)	(0,412)	(0,407)	(0,357)	(0,323)	(0,391)
Population	−0,079	−0,079	−0,079	−0,079	−0,074	−0,074	−0,079
	(0,150)	(0,194)	(0,203)	(0,210)	(0,191)	(0,149)	(0,207)
Terrain	0,361***	0,361*	0,361*	0,361*	0,349*	0,349***	0,361**
	(0,132)	(0,185)	(0,194)	(0,197)	(0,182)	(0,130)	(0,172)
Non-contiguous	0,924	0,924	0,924	0,924	1,151	1,151	0,924
	(0,816)	(1,305)	(2,075)	(0,905)	(1,290)	(0,807)	(1,344)
Oil exporter	0,283	0,283	0,283	0,283	0,351	0,351	0,283
	(0,558)	(0,645)	(1,948)	(0,733)	(0,638)	(0,552)	(0,703)
Instability (polity)	−0,057	−0,057	−0,057	−0,057	−0,033	−0,033	−0,057
	(0,454)	(0,455)	(0,526)	(0,491)	(0,449)	(0,448)	(0,510)
Ethnic fractionalisation	0,493	0,493	0,493	0,493	0,442	0,442	0,493
	(0,580)	(0,804)	(0,903)	(0,879)	(0,795)	(0,574)	(0,863)
Religious fractionalisation	−2,062***	−2,062**	−2,062*	−2,062*	−1,974**	−1,974**	−2,062**
	(0,778)	(1,010)	(1,104)	(1,083)	(0,999)	(0,769)	(1,021)
Constant	−0,626	−0,626	−0,626	−0,626	−0,822	−0,822	−0,626
	(2,469)	(3,138)	(3,479)	(3,517)	(3,101)	(2,441)	(3,371)
Observations	1,104	1,104	1,104	1,104	1,104	1,104	1,104

Notes ***$p < 0,01$; **$p < 0,05$; *$p < 0,1$ (two-tailed). Models reflect logistic regressions. Clustering is done on 49 independent states included in the sample. Control variables are utilised from Fearon and Laitin (2003). Models were assessed using Stata 12.

clustered by country, White robust standard errors, bootstrap and jackknife correction, and rare events logistic regressions. When clustering standard errors by country, the model assumes that events are independent between states but may not be independent within states. In other words, the model takes into account that a civil conflict in a specific country may not be an independent event from an earlier civil conflict. Robust standard errors correct for standard errors if an improper estimator is used, such as if logistic regression was employed when probit may have been the proper likelihood function. Bootstrapping involves drawing 1000 random samples from the data and re-estimating the standard error. Like bootstrapping, jackknifing involves resampling the data, but is distinct in that it also drops random observations. Finally, rare events logistic regressions provide corrections for underestimation brought on by the relative infrequency of the dependent variable.

Results

The observed association between coup-proofing and civil conflict is reported in Table 1. Each model reflects a logistic regression that implements a different approach to assuring the robustness of the results. Coup-proofing is significantly additive to the onset of civil conflict in each specification, a relationship that is illustrated through the use of predicted probabilities in Figure 1.

Holding other variables at their median, countries ranking one on the Pilster and Bohmelt measure for effective ground organisations have a 1,1 per cent probability for the onset of a conflict in a given year. This increases to 1,8 per cent at two organisations, 3,2 per cent at three organisations, and 5,9 per cent at four. A modest change from one to two organisations increases the predicted probability of civil conflict by 64 per cent, while increasing from one to three nearly triples the likelihood (a 191 per cent increase).

Figure 1   Predicted probability of the onset of civil conflict
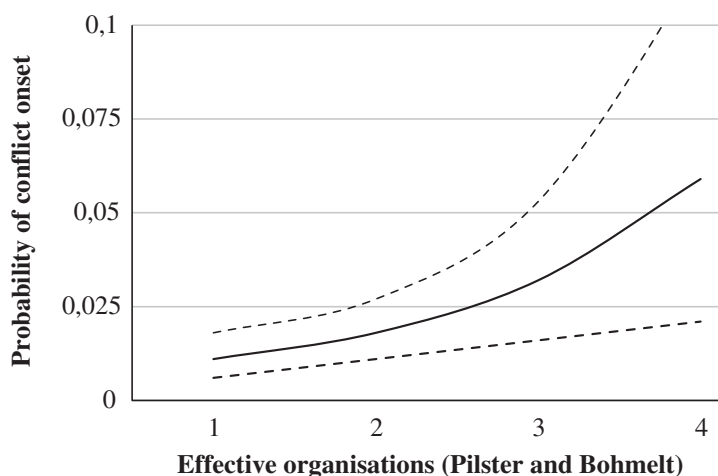
These findings strongly support the hypothesis and provide evidence to support the general accusation levelled by the Malian military in early 2012. Just prior to Mali's March 2012 coup, its soldiers openly complained of President Touré's desire to 'fight a war against the rebels in return for staying in power'.[29] By building up their coup-proofing apparatus, leaders do seem to be striking a Faustian bargain in which they undermine the capacity of the state to stifle civil unrest. The nature of the independent variable of interest is also potentially limited in illustrating the adverse consequences of coup-proofing. The effective organisations variable offered by Pilster and Bohmelt relies on identifying structural fractionalisation in the armed forces. The preceding argument theorised that such divisions would create a number of problems for the counterinsurgency capabilities of the state. However, this says nothing about what coup-proofing can do to the rebel side of the conflict equation. Roessler, for example, has demonstrated that purging ethnic groups from the government can increase the mobilisational capacity of insurgents. Though similar data are never likely to be available for the armed forces, the consequences of soldier purges can clearly be expected to follow a similar, if not stronger, trend. Further, when conducted along ethnic lines, such purges will also act to increase group-level grievances against the state, thereby increasing the willingness to rebel.

A glance at the control variables reveals that the occurrence of a coup attempt in the current year is also an important part of the civil conflict story, with coup-free states displaying a predicted conflict onset probability of 1,3 per cent, while a coup-afflicted state sees a probability of 7,7 per cent. To be clear, this rate is likely exaggerated, even if only slightly. As noted earlier, a number of the conflicts accounted for by the dependent variable can specifically trace their roots to coups. Consequently, it is important to distinguish that in the current models we are merely witnessing *association* between coups and civil conflict instead of coups acting as a catalyst for a distinct event. While there are important theoretical reasons to believe that coups can help to promote civil wars, the current state of the data limits such a conclusion.

Terrain displayed the expected positive sign in each specification, while increased religious fractionalisation was found to be a robust negative influence on conflict onset. Though this is in contrast with the common assumption that multiple identities promote strife, Horowitz has suggested that states with highly fractionalised identities, particularly those with numerous small groups, will experience less conflict due to coalition-building. Trouble arises, he argues, when one major group faces competition from a competing, though demonstrably less powerful, group.[30]

Other controls were poor predictors of conflict. This is not to say that factors such as the level of democratisation and economic wealth are not an important part of the conflict story. Such factors could be crucial components of specific conflicts and could still be a more generalisable cause of the dependent variable. The models demonstrated that the poorer states in the sample were not statistically more likely to face conflict onset than wealthier states. It is important to be clear that the analysis is limited to a sample of African cases. So while statistical explorations such as the influential work of Fearon and Laitin find wealth to be consistently significant in a *global* sample, the current study's focus on Africa inevitably limits its scope to a population of cases that are largely at lower levels of economic development than the sample utilised in global studies. In other words, although a wealthier state in Africa may not face better conflict prospects that a slightly poorer African state, both of those states are potentially worse off than the far more developed countries elsewhere in the world (e.g., Europe and North America).

Conclusions

Although civil wars will continue, self-interested leaders can – and usually do – maintain power for long periods of time. Though Mali's 2012 coup led Fearon to conclude that President Touré should have built a 'loyal' armed backing, Mali's 7 300-man army was already counterbalanced by a 4 800-strong paramilitary apparatus, spearheaded by the 'Red Berets' presidential guard. The fact that this was Mali's first coup since 1991 should indicate the success of coup-proofing. Jay Ulfelder has consistently ranked Mali amongst the most likely countries in the world to suffer a coup.[31] In contrast to a coup being 'easy', the skill of the Red Berets was demonstrated by Mali's two coup-free decades, and their loyalty illustrated with their effort at a failed counter-coup soon after Touré's ousting. In contrast, the country continued to struggle with rebellion. The lessons in this paper suggest that Mali's efforts to reduce coup prospects could be at least partially to blame.

The preceding analysis results in two major points. First, studies of civil conflict have overwhelmingly focused on rebel-side considerations for motive, manifested most obviously in the greed versus grievance debate. This study demonstrates that state-side characteristics, particularly the preferences of individual leaders and the structural nature of the security apparatus, are important determinants of civil conflict. Second, studies of anti-regime activity have frequently conflated multiple forms of political violence, including but not limited to social revolutions, coups d'état, civil war, and even terrorism. Carefully distinguishing between different types of anti-regime activity will allow scholars to parse how different political actors influence and are influenced by these dynamics. This effort demonstrates that a major mechanism for protecting the security of a regime's elite could increase the vulnerability of their states. Future efforts could more clearly identify the ways in which state behaviour can display such a paradoxical relationship with political stability.

Acknowledgements

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