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Leader Survival Strategies and the Onset of Civil Conflict: A Coup-Proofing Paradox

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Abstract

It is paradoxical that authoritarian leaders often hold power for long periods of time, despite their states being plagued with rebellion. Scholarship has argued the practice of coup-proofing is potentially responsible for this trend. However, though regular armed forces are often allowed to whither when coup-proofing, states often retain substantial capabilities in the form of well-armed and well-trained coup-proofing units. This article argues that coup-proofing is more likely to contribute to rebellion when leaders are hesitant to deploy their coup-proofing units: when coup risk is high. Using a global sample of authoritarian regimes for the years 1971–2011, tests indicate that heavily coup-proofed regimes do in fact see a considerable increase in civil war likelihood when the risk of a coup is high but see no change in conflict propensity when coup risk is low.

Keywords

civil–military relations, coups and conflicts, military effectiveness, civil wars, coup-proofing

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Observers were shocked to see the ease with which the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and the Levant was able to seize territory from Syria and Iraq in 2014. With IS's continuing gains, the United States was confronted with the reality that the Iraqi state it had invested billions of dollars into over the previous decade was wholly incapable of slowing the IS advance. Regardless of the capabilities possessed by IS, the U.S. government and other observers had drastically overestimated the military capacity of the Iraqi government. U.S. President Barack Obama had even infamously likened IS to a junior varsity sports team earlier in the year, even after the group had seized Fallujah. Unfortunately, all quantitative assessments of state military capabilities would agree with President Obama's January 2014 assessment of the Iraqi armed forces vis-à-vis IS, and all of these assessments would have similarly been dead wrong.

The IS advance came just a few years after similar gains witnessed by Islamists in Mali in early 2012. Mali's soldiers openly complained that the government was providing insufficient resources to combat the rebels, a trend that was allegedly due to President Amadou Toumani Touré's desire to "fight a war against the rebels in return for staying in power" (Radio France International, 2012). A mutiny-turned-coup unseated Touré in March, leading to a larger political crisis and additional gains by Islamists that amounted to nearly half of Mali's territory. The deteriorating security situation ultimately prompted a French-led military intervention, while international pressure and a subsequent countercoup led to the ouster of the coup-born government. Commentaries on Mali's crisis tended to blame the coup for the failures of the Malian army, ignoring the ongoing losses the army had experienced leading up to the coup. And while these assessments suggest the coup leaders' stated motive was little more than post hoc window dressing, the reality is that the army's concerns regarding the regime's commitment to fighting were raised prior to the coup, and the coup itself spontaneously arose during Touré's effort to quell a resulting mutiny at an army base.

Touré unequivocally rejected claims that he was not providing his military adequate resources, but it is perhaps paradoxical that many leaders have managed to retain power, sometimes indefinitely, while portions of their states continue to be mired in civil war. This trend has been previously noted by comparativisits such as Herbst (2004) who described the tendency for African regimes to reach an equilibrium in which a capital remains stable while the countryside falls into chaos. This article investigates this trend by considering the policy choices of leaders, specifically the claim offered by Mali's putschists regarding the practice of "coup-proofing."

While it may at first seem counterintuitive that a leader would create conditions that would increase the likelihood of a rebellion, I argue that leaders can in fact increase their prospects of political survival by adopting policies that make the likelihood of a civil war increase. Prior work by Roessler (2011) and Powell (2014), for example, has detailed how coup-proofing can increase the likelihood of rebellion while decreasing the prospects of a coup. This article extends these efforts by considering how a higher threat of a coup can influence a leader's

willingness to fully commit to counterinsurgency. Specifically, this article argues the existence of a strong coup-proofing apparatus does not preclude a leader from having a highly capable, highly mobile military force with the potential to crush dissidents. Instead, reliance on a coup-proofing apparatus becomes most problematic when an executive is reluctant to commit that apparatus away from the capital. In short, the positive influence of coup-proofing on civil conflict onset is expected to be conditional on the degree to which the executive faces the threat of a coup.

This article proceeds in four broad parts. I begin by describing leaders as rational, self-interested actors who prioritize policies that increase their ability to maintain power. Second, I review a growing literature that shows vulnerable leaders structurally coup-proof their regimes by building up "mutually suspicious" military organizations that "counterbalance" each other (Belkin & Schofer, 2003). Further analyses have demonstrated these coup-proofing efforts can effectively reduce the likelihood of coups (De Bruin, 2017; Marcum & Brown, 2017; Pilster & Böhmelt, 2015; Powell, 2012; Quinlivan, 1999; Rabinowitz & Jargowski, 2017; Rwengabo, 2012) and substantially weaken the military capacity of the state (e.g., Narang & Talmadge, 2017; Pilster & Böhmelt, 2011). Third, I argue for a conditional relationship between coup-proofing and civil war onset. Finally, I proceed to a quantitative cross-national investigation of the argument for the years 1971–2011. I close the article with a discussion of the implications of the findings.

The Domestic Civil–Military Problematique

The model of democratic governance presented by Downs (1957, p. 11) assumes that "every government seeks to maximize political support" and "its primary goal is reelection . . . " To gain and maintain power is the first order of business, more important than even improving the state that they control. Once in power, leaders seek out "the most efficient means" by which they can maintain their rule. Leaders operating under the rules of democracy implement policy that aims to maximize their support among voters with the least amount of effort, as it is the voters who ultimately choose whether they will retain office. Meanwhile, autocrats develop policy that is directed specifically at the means that is most likely to remove them.

Survival threats vary within countries over time and vary from country to country. We can, however, begin to understand the survival threats autocrats face by looking at their likeliest means of removal. The Archigos Dataset of Political Leaders accounts for irregular methods of leader removal that includes coups, rebellions, foreign intervention, popular protests, assassinations, internal power struggles, other ambiguous domestic removals, and other unclear actions (Goemans, Gleditsch, & Chiozza, 2009). Of over 500 leaders exit that came about through irregular means, coups were more likely to remove a leader than all other forms of irregular removal combined and over 5 times more likely than the second most common means of removal (rebellions).

Coup-proofing is thus a reasonable expectation, given that the *Archigos* data reveal organized civil wars, popular uprisings, foreign imposed regime change, and

other forms of irregular regime change individually account for such a small proportion of irregular removals.[1] Recent years have seen a flurry of quantitative scholarship dealing with the phenomenon of coup-proofing, beginning with the seminal offering of Belkin and Schofer (2003) and furthered by the work of Pilster and Böhmelt (2011, 2012, 2015), Roessler (2011), Powell (2012), and De Bruin (2017). This literature reveals a number of trends regarding the phenomenon. First, dictators are more likely to coup-proof than their democratic counterparts (Pilster & Böhmelt, 2012). This is unsurprising, given that democracies are generally less likely to have coups attempted against them, and democratic leaders will be more constrained from utilizing public funds for private goods (Lehoucq & Pérez-Liñán, 2014; Lindberg & Clark, 2008; Powell, 2014). Second, coup-proofing has been found to effectively deter coups (Pilster & Böhmelt, 2015; Powell, 2012; Roessler, 2011). Third, and more important to the current argument, coup-proofing has been argued to undermine military effectiveness (e.g., Biddle & Zirkle, 1996; Brown, Fariss, & McMahon, 2016; Narang & Talmadge, 2017; Pilster & Böhmelt, 2011; Quinlivan, 1999; Reiter & Stam, 1998; Talmadge, 2013, 2015).

To suggest that leaders intentionally weaken their militaries is potentially at odds with traditional international relations scholarship, particularly realism, but has been hinted at in the literature. "Omnibalancing" theory, for example, contends that vulnerable leaders turn their attention to internal threats when forming military alliances. Moving from a state-centric to leader-centric theory, David (1991, p. 238) summarizes the disparate views in international relations by noting balance of power theorists assume a leader asks "How does this policy affect the power of the state?" when they should be asking "How does this policy affect the probability of *my* remaining in power" (original emphasis).[2] Such an approach echoes Downs's belief that individual survival interests prevail and David's (1991, p. 236) claim that leaders "sometimes protect themselves at the expense of the interests of the state" can be extended to show that leaders also use *domestic* policy to increase their prospects for survival. The next section illustrates how these efforts have important implications for the onset of civil conflict.

Coup-Proofing and Civil War

Coup-proofing has been argued to contribute to rebellion through two mechanisms, each of which treats the decision to rebel with a rationalist framework. This approach suggests that rebels carefully evaluate a number of important considerations before revolting, including the likelihood of victory, the gains to be realized from victory, and costs associated with fighting and (potentially) defeat (e.g., Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Lichbach, 1995). Prior rational choice approaches in the civil war literature have largely focused on the gains that are expected to be associated with rebellion. These efforts range from theories of poverty or deprivation to "greed" explanations for civil war (e.g., Buhaug, 2006; Collier & Hoeffler, 1998, 2004; Gurr, 1968). Despite a rich body of literature on civil conflict and growing attention to

numerous specifications of economic and political indicators, less attention has been given to rebels' perceptions of the likelihood of success. While heightened grievances or the presence of exploitable resources could promote the incentive for conflict, these approaches largely ignore or only indirectly consider the influence of military capabilities of either party to the conflict.

On the rebel side, dissidents can see their capabilities directly increased by coup-proofing. An exceptional offering by Roessler (2011), for example, has shown that ethnic groups that have been recently purged from the government possess greater mobilizational capacity than groups that were never part of the state apparatus. Roessler finds that ethnic purges from the government can effectively reduce the likelihood the targeted group will pursue a coup attempt. However, these maneuvers also increase the likelihood that the group will form an insurgency after being purged.[3] Unlike groups that were not recently a part of the state apparatus, recently expelled groups are likely to have more resources ranging from increased human capital to overseas connections.

On the state side, institutional coup-proofing of the military has similarly been found to reduce vulnerability to coups (De Bruin, 2017; Pilster & Böhmelt, 2015; Powell, 2012) and, at least in the context of Africa, increases the likelihood of civil conflict (Powell, 2014). The conflict connection largely relies on prior assumptions about the influence of coup-proofing on traditional military capabilities. Studies of the military superiority of democracies in international conflict, for example, have pointed to the tendency of autocrats to either intentionally or inadvertently undermine the combat ability of their armies through coup-proofing. This is perhaps most explicit in the work of Reiter and Stam (e.g., 1998) who focus on two main factors when discussing military effectiveness. First, individual soldiering refers to "behavior of individuals on the battlefield" and includes "the willingness of soldiers to lead others, execute their orders, put their lives in danger in combat, resist the temptation to flee under fire, and seize the initiative when opportunity presents itself" (Reiter & Stam, 1998, p. 261). Second, organizational efficacy considers "executing tasks such as general planning, providing logistical support, gathering intelligence, preparing appropriate works such as entrenchments and ramparts, training, and achieving tactical surprise" (Reiter & Stam, 1998, p. 261). Both aspects of effectiveness are severely undermined by coup-proofing. Reiter and Stam (1998) warn that a "nondemocratic political leader is more likely than a democratic leader to perceive that the armed forces may pose a domestic political threat," and this "encourages the civilian leadership to promote military leaders who are politically loyal to the regime rather than leaders who are militarily competent and to frequently rotate officers to prevent them from developing close ties to their troops" (p. 266). In short, competence of individual soldiers will be systematically disrupted by personnel decisions, whether recruitment, retention, promotion, rotation, or purging.

Each of these broad detriments was seen in Iraq prior to the gains of IS. Beginning in 2007, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki expanded his power by taking over the role of commander in chief, later creating a special operations unit under his direct

control. The Iraq Special Operations Force [AQ1](ISOF) acted as Maliki's praetorian guard as he began to transition the regular armed forces to a loyal political unit. As early as 2008, U.S. Lieutenant General Mark Hertling remarked that "Sunni leaders were being replaced by people that didn't know Mosul; commanders that didn't know Talafar" (Schogol, 2014)[AQ2]. Soon after, in late 2010, Maliki purged dozens of "the most experienced intelligence officers" in the national intelligence directorate in favor of "inexperienced political officers loyal to his Shiite Dawa party" (Bengali, 2010).[AQ3]

Organizational efficacy also suffered dramatically. As Andreski (1968, p. 92) has noted, "the proposition that unitary command is advantageous in war is so evident that no elaborate proofs are required," and the inability of coup-proofed militaries to coordinate has been used as an explanation for a number of combat debacles (Brooks, 2008; Pollack, 2002; Talmadge, 2013, 2015). In Iraq, Maliki's coup-proofing efforts "undermined soldiers' morale and made it nearly impossible for the multiple forces . . . to coordinate effectively" (De Bruin, 2014). Demoralized and unwilling to fight, reports suggest that as many as two full army divisions—up to 30,000 Iraqi soldiers—simply fled from the approach of 800 IS militants (Chulov, Hawramy, & Ackerman, 2014).

An additional detriment can be seen with how funding is utilized when coup-proofing. Powell (2014) has pointed to a critical shift in the nature and destination of military spending. First, authoritarian leaders frequently attempt to appease their militaries through excessive allowances and symbolic spending. A large paycheck can certainly keep a soldier in the barracks, but such spending does little to increase the military capacity of the state and its ability to project power. Henk and Rupiya's (2001) assessment of militaries in Sub-Saharan Africa even suggested that military expenditures are potentially *inversely* associated with actual military capabilities. Further, even expenditures that go to actual military hardware can be similarly limited in regard to its contribution to military effectiveness. Highly sophisticated weapons systems are often purchased for the purpose of prestige and often go unused or be allowed to fall into disrepair.

Second, coup-proofing also sees resources redirected from the regular armed forces to the paramilitary bodies that are tasked with protecting the executive. This may involve reassigning more capable soldiers to the paramilitary, as Saddam Hussein did while moving skilled soldiers from the Iraqi army to the Republican Guard. This can also involve redirecting funds and hardware to the paramilitary, while the regular armed forces are allowed to whither, as seen in Sierra Leone, when Siaka Stevens disarmed the army while building up his Internal Security Unit (Kposowa, 2006). Again, these trends are apparent in Iraq's recent history. While Iraq's second army division (which notoriously collapsed in June 2014) looked "modern in structure with overwhelming advantage in manpower and firepower," the reality was that it was "undermanned, underequipped, and undertrained" (Abbas & Trombly, 2014). As discussed in the following section, this stands in stark contrast to the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF).

This narrative illustrates prior beliefs that survival strategies undermine military effectiveness in authoritarian regimes and support recent arguments that coup-proofed regimes will be more vulnerable to civil conflict. However, the preceding discussion has also pointed to the potential for authoritarian governments to have a particularly effective and loyal fighting force: their coup-proofing units. While agreeing that coup-proofing—and poor civil–military relations more generally—certainly has detrimental influences on the state's ability to project power, the following section argues that ability should be weakest when leaders are least likely to deploy components of their coup-proofing apparatus.

Coup Risk and the Reluctance to Mobilize

Prior literature and a multitude of case evidence suggests that coup-proofing undermines the battlefield capabilities of armed forces and can consequently contribute to a heightened likelihood of civil war. However, even coup-proofed regimes are not completely devoid of military capabilities. Although the regular armed forces often wither, coup-proofed regimes still have paramilitary units that could serve the purpose of war fighting, even if that task is not their reason for existence. There are precedents in interstate conflict that can be seen as analogous to the argument. The Iran–Iraq war, for example, saw Saddam Hussein's army perform well below expectations in the conflict's early years, while Hussein's decision to utilize the Republican Guard in combat helped shift the tide of the conflict in its later years. The poor performance of the Iraqi army was largely due to Hussein's coup-proofing efforts. As Iranian soldiers closed to within around 100 km of Baghdad, Hussein made an important strategic decision.

First, he reversed "virtually all" of his coup-proofing activities, for which he had "severely limited military training; he both centralized and fractured command arrangements; and he restricted horizontal communication within the military and developed an intelligence apparatus directed as his own forces" (Talmadge, 2013, p. 200). Second, Hussein started expanding the Republican Guard and began to utilize them against the Iranian army. Although the newly formed Special Republican Guard would remain in Baghdad to Guard against a coup, the bulk of its membership would soon receive advanced training and would be free from the frequent officer rotations that had plagued the regular army. This allowed different units to more easily coordinate, and the Republican Guard subsequently revealed an armed body that was "quite effective" on the battlefield. In short, though Hussein's efforts to coup-proof seriously undermined the military capability of the Iraqi Army, the Republican Guard was still a competent fighting force. The decisive factor in this case was Hussein's decision to utilize his coup-proofing apparatus in combat. The issue, then, was not necessarily a complete paucity of military capabilities in the Iraqi state so much as the manner in which the regime chose to utilize the resources it maintained.[4]

Counterinsurgency will also rarely face a fighting force as robust as a standing foreign army, especially when a rebellion is in its infancy. Infantile insurgencies usually pose little threat to the leader's immediate tenure and are unlikely to lead the head of state to take the potentially risky step of removing elements of their coup-proofing apparatus to combat that (lesser) threat. The more recent decisions of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki illustrate this process for civil conflict. The ISOF was originally staffed at over 4,500 well-trained and well-armed personnel. Maliki worked to expand the size (10,000 personnel) and reach of the unit, eventually harnessing it under his direct control to serve as his praetorian guard.

While Iraq's second army division was disintegrating against the IS advance in summer 2014, Maliki was concerned with maintaining power in Baghdad. By August 2014, the Maliki government was facing increased pressure—both internally and externally—to step down, while rumors of a coup began to circulate in Baghdad. Undeterred, the embattled prime minister offered a defiant speech that hinted that he would utilize force to maintain office. Iraqis then witnessed an "unprecedented deployment of army commandos and special elite forces [throughout] Baghdad, especially sensitive areas close to the green zone and the entrances of the capital" (Rasheed, 2014). Some observers concluded the rumored military coup was actually underway. However, anyone hoping for a quick demise of the Maliki regime would soon be disappointed, as they had taken their positions at his order.

An important distinction between Hussein's decision in 1986 and Maliki's in 2014 was the threat posed by the opponent. Iran's army had closed to within 100 km of Baghdad, and Hussein was increasingly aware that losing the war would lead to his ouster, whether by the Iranians or by disgruntled elements of his own regime. IS, though making impressive gains in mid-2014, was a comparatively weaker opponent that posed little threat to overrunning Baghdad.[5] While the Iraqi army continued to struggle and international actors stepped in to contribute through air strikes, security in Baghdad had improved to the point the government was able to end its decade-old curfew in February 2015.

This dynamic echoes a trend noted previously by comparativists remarking on conflicts in Africa. Herbst (2004, p. 364), for example, described a "quite remarkable" failure of African militaries to mobilize in times of crisis. Following this display of apparent indifference in the early stages of conflict, many states fall into an "equilibrium" that sees a calm capital, while the hinterlands fall into chaos. And just as Reiter and Stam (1998) note that the perils of coup-proofing will be primarily associated with authoritarianism, lessons from Africa further illustrate how the reluctance to mobilize should also be a primarily authoritarian trade. The Goodluck Jonathan government in Nigeria, for example, was routinely criticized for not fully committing to combating Boko Haram. Although the Nigerian military, perhaps predictably, accomplished large gains leading up to the 2015 presidential polls, Jonathan was ultimately swept from power via the electoral process. In line with prior studies suggesting democratic leaders will be required to provide a demonstrable public good, autocrats have little to fear from elections. The preceding

discussion indicates that such trends reflect both a weak military capacity and an incentive for a leader to refuse the capabilities they do possess in times of crisis, leading to the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: The influence of coup-proofing on civil conflict onset is conditional on high levels of coup risk.

Research Design

This section describes a more systematic effort to assess the hypothesis. Tests are conducted within a global sample of authoritarian regimes for the years 1971–2011, using country-year as the unit of analysis. Ultimately, 107 countries are captured in the analysis. The sample is limited to authoritarian regimes, as indicated by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014).[6] Logistic regression is employed due to a binary dependent variable.

Conflict onset is captured using data from the Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD). The ACD measure 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" (Themnér & Wallensteen, 2013, p. 509).[7] The measure is advantageous in that it allows the model to consider the implications for lower levels of civil violence. The theory is primarily concerned with the decision to take up arms, and mechanisms related to conflict onset are potentially invalid when applied to other conflict dynamics such as escalation and duration. Indeed, the prior discussion of the Iraq case points to how coup-proofing dynamics can change during conflict.

Prior scholarship has also pointed to estimates for civil war models bring biased if the data conflate multiple forms of domestic conflict. For example, scholars have encouraged studies of civil war duration to include a coup dummy variable since coups are almost invariably just a day or two in length and could have a strong influence on duration models. This is especially true for assessments of wars aimed at overthrowing the central government (e.g., Cunningham, 2006; Fearon, 2004; Thyne, 2012). Others have recently argued for these events to be excluded as civil wars altogether (Bell & Sudduth, 2017; Hultquist, 2013; Thyne, 2015).[8] Agreeing with Hultquist's (2013, p. 267) conclusion that "coups do not require the popular mobilization that largely informs the theory about civil war processes," the dependent variable excludes cases of "civil conflict" whose case histories reveal the events to be coups based on the coup data of Powell and Thyne (2011).[9] This is an especially important step given the current focus on dynamics related to coup risk. The theory supposes that civil war onset will be higher when coup-proofed regimes are confronted with *higher coup risk*. Including "bloody" coups that happen to result in 25 battle-related deaths in the dependent variable would almost certainly increase the likelihood of Type I error by inflating the estimates for conditions when bloody

coups are most likely (i.e., when the coup risk variable is high). In short, failure to recode the events would bias the estimates in favor of the first hypothesis.

Institutional coup-proofing is accounted for through Pilster and Böhmelt's (2011) index for *effective organizations*. This index considers the total number of armed ground organizations (and their personnel numbers) that could legitimately combat a coup.[10] The measure excludes unarmed bodies and naval entities (e.g., port authorities or maritime police) that lack the ground capabilities needed to respond to a coup effort. It is an interval-level measure ranging from 1 to 5.6 with a median value of 1.6. Prior work by Powell (2014) shows the measure to be positively associated with the onset of civil conflict. The current hypothesis suggests that the anticipated positive influence of coup-proofing on civil war onset will be strongest when coup risk is high and statistically weaker when the threat of a coup is low. *Coup risk* is accounted for using a latent model for coup attempts. The measure reports the predicted probability of a coup attempt, following the lead of the models presented in Powell (2012).[11]

An effort is made to remain consistent with the set of control variables utilized in the influential study by Fearon and Laitin (2003). The natural log of *gross domestic product* per capita captures the level of state wealth and can represent a variety of dynamics in civil war, ranging from poverty-driven grievances to the ability of the state to project power. The measure is taken from updates of Gleditsch (2002). The log of *population* captures full number of potential dissenters as well as the state's ability to monitor them (Gleditsch, 2002). *Terrain* accounts for the percentage of mountainous territory and is expected to be positively associated with conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). *Independence* controls for the amount of time the state has been an independent member of the international system, with younger states expected to be more conflict prone. *Ethnic fractionalization* considers the opportunity for identity-based conflict. Temporal dependence is addressed by accounting for the time since last onset of a civil conflict and the measure's squared and cubed polynomials (Carter & Signorino, 2010). All time-varying independent variables are lagged 1 year.

Additional considerations are also given to regime type. This argument, of course, primarily focuses on the role of individual leaders. This is true both for the threats the regime faces, seen with the preference to protect against coups over other forms of anti-regime activity and with how leaders prioritize their responses. While different leaders may have similar incentives, it is important to consider the degree to which leaders are free to manipulate the composition and deployment of their security apparatus. In line with Marcum and Brown's (2016, p. 264) observation that "personalist leaders by definition personally control the state's security apparatus," a control for personalist regime is included.

Results

Results are reported in Table 1 and Figure 1. Models 1–3 reflect a specification that omits the personalist measure. This is done since personalist regimes are thought to be virtually synonymous with coup-proofing and are highly correlated with the

Table 1. The Conditional Influence of Coup-Proofing on Civil Conflict Onset, 1971–2011.

Variable	Cluster	FEs	REs	Cluster	FEs	REs
Institutional coup-proofing	−0.298 (0.265)	−0.356 (0.323)	−0.224 (0.271)	−0.276 (0.258)	−0.368 (0.326)	−0.221 (0.271)
Coup risk	−1.688** (0.716)	−1.872* (0.923)	−1.564* (0.778)	−1.674** (0.717)	−1.911* (0.929)	−1.570* (0.777)
Coup-Proofing × Risk	0.775** (0.339)	0.914* (0.480)	0.714* (0.407)	0.786* (0.344)	0.941* (0.488)	0.722* (0.407)
Personalist regime				−0.217 (0.296)	−0.192 (0.618)	−0.093 (0.309)
Gross domestic product per capita	−0.451* (0.210)	−0.573 (0.379)	−0.488** (0.203)	−0.462* (0.206)	−0.582 (0.380)	−0.492** (0.202)
Oil rents	0.078 (0.055)	−0.072 (0.121)	0.058 (0.051)	0.078 (0.054)	−0.073 (0.121)	0.059 (0.051)
Population	0.264** (0.110)	0.721 (0.553)	0.302* (0.149)	0.241* (0.109)	0.752 (0.563)	0.293* (0.150)
Independence	0.005** (0.002)		0.006* (0.003)	0.005** (0.002)		0.006* (0.003)
Ethnic fractionalization	1.008* (0.538)		1.151* (0.582)	1.070* (0.547)		1.166* (0.582)
Terrain	0.187 (0.128)		0.173 (0.118)	0.178 (0.127)		0.170 (0.118)
Times since conflict	−0.080*** (0.020)	0.037 (0.024)	−0.054** (0.021)	−0.081*** (0.020)	0.036 (0.024)	−0.055** (0.021)
Constant	−11.905** (4.214)		−13.704* (5.978)	−11.984** (4.357)		−13.703* (5.976)
Observations	2,392	1,144	2,392	2,392	1,144	2,392
Number of countries	107	45	107	107	45	107

Note. Squared and cubed time polynomials are excluded for presentation purposes. Independence, ethnic fractionalization, and terrain are dropped from the country FEs models due to no within-unit variation. RE = random effect; FE = fixed effect.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (one-tailed).

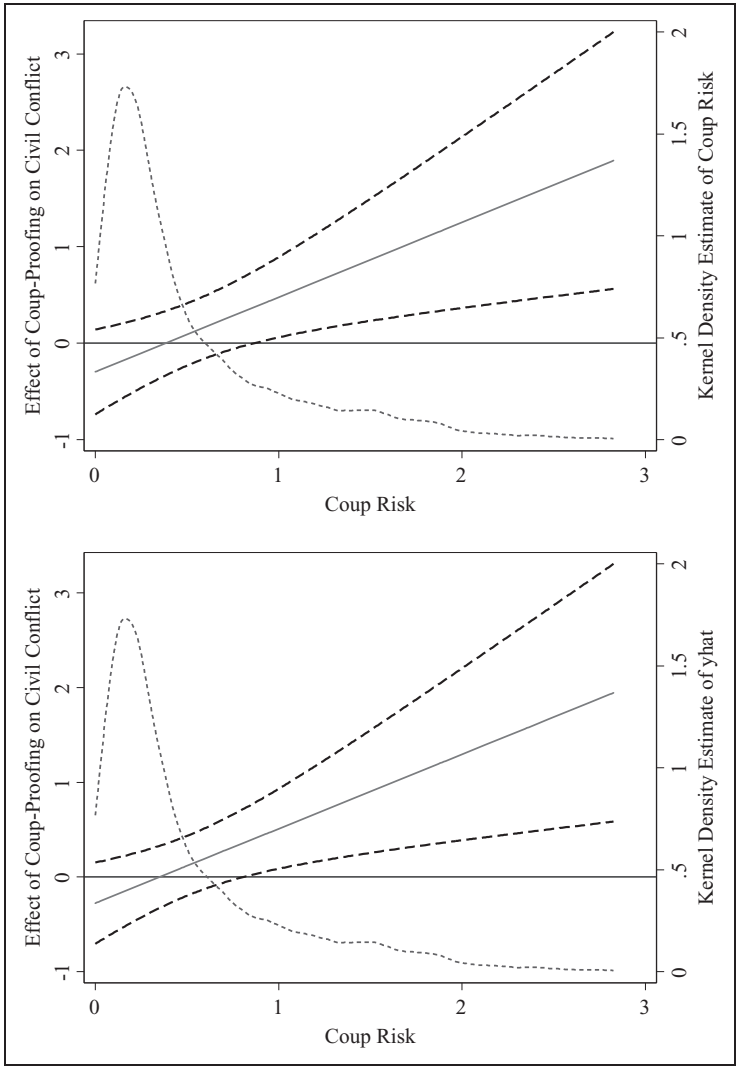

Figure 1. The conditional influence of coup-proofing on civil conflict onset.

measure (Marcum & Brown, 2016). Models 4–6 introduce the personalist regime measure. Each set of models takes three approaches. First, standard errors are clustered by country in Models 1 and 4. Second, Models 2 and 5 incorporate country-level fixed effects. Finally, Models 3 and 6 include country-level random effects. This range of approaches helps ensure that the results are robust against a range of methodological challenges.[12]

The first hypothesis predicted that coup-proofing should be most additive when coup risk is high. Heeding the warnings of Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006), only limited conclusions can be drawn from the coefficients in the table. For example, the coup-proofing measure is negative and insignificant in each model. A casual observer might take this to mean that coup-proofing is unrelated to civil conflict onset. To the contrary, the coefficient is precisely what the theory would expect. In these interactive models, the coup-proofing coefficient reports the variable's association with conflict onset when the other constitutive term, coup-risk, equals zero. In other words, Table 1 shows that higher levels of coup-proofing do not make autocratic states more vulnerable to civil war when the leader faces no threat of a coup.

The Coup-Proofing × Coup Risk interaction term shows how the coup-proofing coefficient changes as values of coup risk increase. Specifically, each model reports a positive and significant multiplicative term, suggesting that the coup-proofing term significantly increases at higher levels of coup risk. The table, however, tells us little about the specific relationship beyond this. Illustrating the coefficients graphically provides a clearer view of the marginal effect. Figure 1 illustrates the conditional influence of coup-proofing on conflict onset. For each figure, the full line, sloping upward when moving from left to right, illustrates how the coup-proofing coefficient changes as the risk of a coup changes. The dashed line reflects a confidence interval, while the thin dashed line shows a kernel density plot that illustrates dispersion in the coup risk measure.

For presentation purposes, the coup risk measure is multiplied by 10. A value of 1 represents a predicted coup probability of .10. Each figure reports that coup-proofing is unassociated with coup risk above a value of .8. Holding other variables at their median values, a country ranking 3 on the effective organizations measure would see a predicted probability of civil conflict onset of .015. This value jumps by around 80% (to .027) when increasing coup risk to a value of 1. When coup risk equals 2, the jump is even more pronounced, reaching .058.

These results provide strong support for the research hypothesis. Specifically, prior findings for structural coup-proofing being positively associated with the onset of rebellion seem to be driven by countries with high coup risk. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that Powell (2014) sample consisted solely of African countries, the region that has been by far the most coup prone in recent decades. Instead of a general weakening of the internal security apparatus, the negative consequences of coup-proofing appear to be most pronounced when autocrats have strong reason to fear a coup.

This findings do not suggest that regimes are at risk of being ousted in these conflicts. Instead, a loyal and capable coup-proofing apparatus could effectively prevent a siege of the capital. Returning to Iraq's history, this explanation is in line with Quinlivan's (1999) description of the aftermath of the Gulf War. With the prevailing consensus that Hussein would be removed via a coup "within six to eight months" (Quinlivan, 1999, p. 159), the Shia in the Basra region rose against the regime, joined by Iraqi regulars defecting from the army. The uprising spread to important cities such as Karbala within a week. Baghdad, however, "remained

silent" due in part to no coalition strikes against Hussein's Republican Guard (Quinlivan, 1999, pp. 160–161). In short, though the regime may have been unable to prevent the rise of rebellions, any thoughts of overcoming the Republican Guard was a delusion that would teach the regime's dissident's a very costly lesson.

Conclusions

This article adds to the literature on civil conflict by focusing on dynamics related to military capacity of the state. Prior efforts to account for a state's military prowess generally utilize measures that indirectly and crudely assess its ability to project power. A few notable efforts have more directly accounted for the relative capability of the state vis-à-vis rebels by considering the mobilization capacity of ethnic groups and the capability-reduced aspects of structural coup-proofing (e.g., Powell 2014; Roessler, 2011). This effort built on the latter by carefully considering the conditions under which coup-proofing should make civil conflict most likely. Specifically, the theory argued that prior discussions of coup-proofing ignored the fact that—though regular armies will often be left weak—coup-proofed autocrats often have strong military units in the form of their coup-proofing apparatus. In contrast to prior findings that point to coup-proofing being unconditionally associated with higher levels of domestic conflict, this article finds that coup-proofing is problematic when leaders are most reluctant to utilize their coup-proofing apparatus for the purposes of counterinsurgency: when coup risk is high.

The findings also touch on the literature relevant to the combat superiority of democracies (e.g., Reiter & Stam, 1998, 2002). Future efforts investigating international conflict could further explore how different survival threats influence the conflict behavior of autocrats. While Pilster and Böhmelt (2012) found more heavily coup-proofed regimes to suffer higher loss exchange ratios, the results presented here hint that a larger challenge for autocrats could be their willingness to fully commit to fighting. The results also touch on other recent literatures. For example, the reduction in regular military capabilities has been found to incentivize the adoption of nontraditional military resources such as chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons (e.g., Brown et al., 2016).

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Notes

1. Even these number are perhaps overstated, as many of these "foreign removals" were actually done to restore a legitimate regime that had been removed illegally through a coup (e.g., Jean Hilaire Aubaume's postcoup 3 days in power in 1964 Gabon).
2. Brown, Fariss, and McMahon (2016) have recently found empirical support for David's (1991) argument for alliances.
3. Braithwaite and Sudduth (2016) find that purges of military officers, however, can help prevent conflict recurrence in some contexts.
4. Detailed discussions of how leader's coup-proofing efforts evolve in line with changing threats have also been provided by Sudduth (2017a, 2017b).
5. Islamic State elements were in fact within miles of Baghdad in summer 2014, after laying siege to Haditha and seizing an army base just west of the city. Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey acknowledged "I have no doubt there will be days when they use indirect [mortars and artillery] fire into Baghdad" but ruled an "outright assault" on Baghdad to be unlikely (Islamic State seizes Iraq base amid concern for Baghdad, 2014[AQ4]).
6. Additional models using alternative specifications of authoritarian rule (e.g., Boix, Miller, & Rosato, 2014; Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010; Marshall & Jaggers, 2000) result in substantively similar results.
7. Additional specifications using civil war data from Sarkees (2000) and Fearon and Laitin (2003) yield similar results.
8. See Thyne (2015) for a discussion on this point.
9. In all, Powell and Thyne (2011) point to 38 events in the Armed Conflict Dataset that are actually coups.
10. The measure includes paramilitary organizations that are a formal part of the state apparatus, making them distinct from independent, but state-supported paramilitary groups discussed by Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe (2013) and Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell (2016). These organizations are also outside of the command structure of the regular armed forces. The data include units that are not deliberate coup-proofing bodies, though, in most cases, the organizations have coup-proofing responsibilities (Böhmelt & Clayton, 2017).
11. The variable is derived from a logistic regression, where coup attempt $= \beta 0 + \beta 1 \times$ wealth $+ \beta 2 \times$ growth $+ \beta 3 \times$ polity $+ \beta 4 \times$ polity2 $+ \beta 5 \times$ military personnel $+ \beta 6 \times$ military expenditures $+ \beta 7 \times$ cold war $+ \beta 8 \times$ years since coup $+ \beta 9 \times$ years2 $+ \beta 10 \times$ years3 $+ \epsilon$. Additional models incorporate the structural coup risk measure offered by Belkin and Schofer (2003). I report the former approach since the latter ends at 1999.
12. The author also ran additional specifications accounting for regime type fixed and random effects and considered alternative civil conflict measures. Results remained consistent with those reported here.

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