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FORUM Q&A: AUREL CROISSANT ON COUPS, CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ZIMBABWE



Aurel Croissant is professor of political science at Heidelberg University in Germany, where his research focuses on democratization, authoritarianism, civil-military relations, and Asian politics. He has published over 200 articles, book chapters, monographs, and edited volumes, appearing in English, German, Russian, Spanish, and Korean. Since 2012, he has served as co-editor of Democratization and also serves on the editorial boards of the Asian Journal of Political Science and the Journal of Contemporary Southeast Asian Affairs. He is currently a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy.

In authoritarian regimes, dictators and militaries survive and endure based on a system of mutual support. When dictators become vulnerable—due to mass mobilization against them or sudden political or economic crises—what factors determine when militaries withdraw their support? In the absence of meaningful public protest amidst longstanding economic crisis, such as in Zimbabwe, what might account for a military coup? What does research tell us about the prospects for democracy in Zimbabwe?

Shanthi Kalathil of the International Forum for Democratic Studies spoke with Aurel Croissant about comparative lessons on military interventions in authoritarian regimes, his research on civil-military relations, and its implications for understanding recent events in Zimbabwe. (This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. The views and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy.)

Shanthi Kalathil: In Zimbabwe, even as recently as last year, many felt that the army would be unlikely to break ranks with ruling party Zanu-PF and (former president) Robert Mugabe. With all of this in the news of late, can you talk about your research on when militaries support dictators and when they oust them?

Aurel Croissant: Generally, in autocracies, militaries are a key element of the ruling coalition. That is, either they are the ruler, or as in the case of Zimbabwe, they are an important supporter for the dictator, so no authoritarian regime can survive without the support of the military. For militaries to oust a dictator they need a motive, and they need opportunity. If there's only a motive, such as they oppose the dictator for whatever reason, but there's no opportunity, they may stage a coup d'état, but the coup will fail. If there is opportunity but no motive, then there will be no coup.

There are many different motives for militaries to oust a dictator. The most important motives are probably that military leaders feel that their personal interests or the corporate interests of the military as an organization are threatened by the dictator. In reality it's difficult to distinguish personal from institutional motives, obviously. For example, militaries often defect from an authoritarian leader because they feel that a mass protest against the authoritarian regime may lead to the collapse of the military organization. This was obviously not the case in Zimbabwe because there was no mass protest earlier this year against Mugabe.

A second motive for the military to oust a dictator might be that there is an acute political or economic crisis, and the dictator threatens to cut the military's budget and military privilege. This also was not the case in Zimbabwe.

A third motive is a succession crisis. We know from coup studies and civil-military relations research that dictators are particularly vulnerable to military coups very early and very late in their term. Very early in their term, it's clear that dictators need time and resources to institutionalize mechanisms of "coup-proofing" and to create political

institutions that solve commitment problems. Often dictators come to power through a coup which then may trigger counter-coups.

Dictators also are very vulnerable to military coups when they have been long in power and are of high age, when a succession crisis comes up, or when it's obvious to the military that there will be a succession, either from within the regime or within the ruling family.

Then, the question for the military is, why should they support the successor? In personalist regimes like Zimbabwe with their inherent weak institutions, succession crises are moments of insecurity and uncertainty for military leaders and the other non-military members of the ruling coalition. There are shifting loyalties. It's not clear if the successor will have the support from internal and external allies of the authoritarian regime, and this seems to be the case right now in Zimbabwe. But what's pretty clear is that usually military leaders organize coups in coalition with civilian elites. And this also seems to be the case in Zimbabwe. Segments of the ruling party and part of the civilian regime coalition seem to support the military coup.

Is there a tipping point, then, when militaries withdraw their support? And what do they do next, once they withdraw support for dictators?

Well, tipping points usually include mass mobilization that the regime, the police, and/or the security apparatus are unable to control or repress; sudden economic shocks; or sudden political shock like a lost war or some kind of foreign policy crisis, which is not the case here in Zimbabwe. What seems to be the case here is that this dictator is exceptionally old, and he came up with this really "weird" idea of nominating his wife as successor. It is "weird" because female political leaders find it especially difficult to find acceptance in dictatorships and, more generally, in sub-Saharan Africa. There have not been many female dictators in contemporary history, and there are also not many female government leaders in sub-Saharan Africa. There's one in Malawi, the Central African Republic, Liberia, and that's it.

Here the tipping point seems to be the question of "how to solve the succession", which, for whatever reason, has become an urgent and pressing issue in Zimbabwe. And one could also say that Mugabe nominating not only a member of the family, but a female member of the family, seems to have triggered resistance within the military and the non-military regime coalition. So nominating female successors is a very bad idea for dictators.

Why and when would the military defend or withdraw support for a dictator's family member, or throw its support to another regime figure (such as Emmerson Mnangagwa, the former vice-president)?

Most of the time, militaries do not support family or dynastic succession in authoritarian regimes, with a handful of exceptions (including the Assads in Syria, the Kims in North Korea, and the Kabilas in the Democratic Republic of Congo). In the case of Zimbabwe, it appears that the military elites and party elites together cooperated in the attempt to prevent the family member from taking over the presidency. This is the typical scenario: When a personalist dictator tries to instill a family member as insurance that he won't end up in prison, or be executed or exiled, the regime elites do not follow this decision.

Why do militaries not support family members or dynastic regime succession?

It depends on a number of factors. In the cases I mentioned where the military supports dynastic succession, the commonality seems to be that the dictator established a very elaborate system of control over the military, what is called "coup-proofing." They create various counter-balancing forces, like the 4th Armored Division in Syria or various militias which also counter the power of the military. Second, they appoint trusted communities—family members or members of the same ethnic or religious groups—to key command posts in the military. It seems that Mugabe hasn't done that in Zimbabwe for whatever reasons. Militaries that have been subjected to coup-proofing tend to support dynastic succession because if the family is out, they are out of top positions of power.

Where dictators cannot coup-proof, there is less chance that the military will support family succession. In Egypt, for example, Mubarak was not able to fill the senior positions of the military with members of his religious minority since he wasn't from a religious minority, and tribal affiliations were not all that important in Egypt.

In these cases, the military will look for someone else to take over, either a military leader, or like in Zimbabwe, where there is a meaningful political party, someone from within the civilian elite coalition.

Can coups lead to democracy in countries like Zimbabwe? And if so, under what circumstances?

Coups can, of course, lead to democracy but the majority of coups do not. If you look at the data, the number of coups that have led to democracy has increased in the past 20-25 years, but the majority of coups still result in some form of renewed authoritarian rule. There are some examples of “good coups” or “democratizing coups”: Mali in 1991, Burkina Faso in 2003, Niger in 2010, but those are the exceptions.

More often, coups either lead to a new authoritarian regime, or they lead to a change in leadership within an existing authoritarian regime, which is perhaps a scenario that is the most likely one in Zimbabwe right now.

For a coup to lead to democratization, I think that there must be some other additional external constraints on the military. Mass mobilization seems to be one of the factors that needs to be present in order to move the military, not only towards staging a coup, but also towards institutionalizing democracy. Economic crisis, again, also seems to play a role. Most of these cases of good coups or democratizing coups were coups that took place at a time and in a country where there was strong Western linkage and strong Western leverage. This, of course, not the case with Zimbabwe, where we have strong Chinese linkage and perhaps also some Chinese leverage.

This leads us nicely to our next question: what role do outside actors play in military support for dictators? Was China relevant to what happened in Zimbabwe?

What is known is that General Chiwenga, head of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces, **visited China** the week before the coup, and there are close economic and political ties between China and Zimbabwe that reach back until the late 1970s, when China began to support Mugabe’s guerilla movement against the apartheid regime in South Rhodesia.

In terms of trade and investment, China is one of the most important economic actors and partners of Zimbabwe. Of course, there also is close military to military cooperation between Zimbabwe and China, covering aspects like arms trade, arms imports, military assistance, and military to military exchange. China has made clear that it needs economic stability to continue with investments in Zimbabwe.

I think that there is no empirical evidence to make the simple argument that “the minister of defense went to China in order to get the okay from China so that he could stage a coup.” Yet it is clear that because China is such an important military and economic partner for Zimbabwe, it seems highly unlikely that the military would stage a coup without thinking that China would at least support such a change. And because it is documented that China has emphasized its interests in political and economic stability in Zimbabwe, if the Zimbabwean military can show or demonstrate to China that the

coup will lead to a stable transition, then that creates a kind of incentive for the military to organize and to stage a coup.

In a hypothetical case, once there has been a transition to democracy after a coup, what factors are likely to affect successful civilian control of the military after that point?

There are a number of very crucial factors. The most crucial factor is probably a united civilian elite. In order to have civilian control over the military you need common consensus among civilian elites that they do not try to court the military. Second, you need some kind of civilian mobilization, voter support, or civil society support for civilian control of the military. Third, robust institutions need to be established. In personalist regimes, the leaders do not institutionalize civilian control of the military – it's always personal and informal. The fourth factor is how civilian leaders institutionalize their control over the military. Is it a very rapid, big-bang reform where they try to change civil-military relations overnight, or is it an incremental, gradual process? I would argue that the incremental, gradual process is a more promising approach than the swift, rapid, big-bang reform in civil-military relations.

A supportive factor in the case of Zimbabwe is that this is Zimbabwe's first coup. Militaries that do not have a tradition of military intervention in politics are easier to reform than militaries that have a tradition of intervening, of staging coups, or of forming military governments. That is actually a beneficial factor in Zimbabwe.