



Towards an Anthropology of Coups

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When is a coup a coup? Reflections on the anthropological study of 'coups'

There have been more than 200 coups in 95 countries over the last 75 years, suggesting that they are a significant way of doing politics. Indeed, in relation to the so-called 'culture of coups' in the South Pacific archipelago of Fiji, Stewart Firth and Jon Fraenkel (2007: xx) observe that coups have become one of two ways of changing government there, a point reiterated by a Fiji MP on the very



floor of Parliament in February 2021.

By this reckoning, coups embody and entail an imagined difference but are not content to indulge (or indulge in) the rituals and rhythms of the election cycle: as Caroline Humphrey (2019) might argue, they are not always a break from something, but often a break *towards* something instead. They are impatient forms of political behaviour, refusing to play by the rules of electoral and parliamentary democracy. Yet, even given the predominance of coups globally, we lack a meaningful way of comparing them, beyond identifying common traits and characteristics borrowed from political science – namely, that coups are illegal military takeovers of elected civilian government which interrupt democratic principles, processes, and practices.

When we delve into the typology of coups initiated by Huntington (1968) and added to extensively by subsequent coup scholars, it seems as if there are as many types of coups in the world as there are coups. Beyond a notional sense of their being anti-democratic, unconstitutional, and illegal, and involving an elite struggle to define the *telos* of the state, there is nothing substantively comparable about coups in, say, Fiji, Turkey, Myanmar, Burkina Faso or elsewhere.

In Fiji, coups in 1987 and 2000 expressly sought to overturn election results that had seemed to de-prioritise the leadership and voice of indigenous Fijians in the country. In a historically fraught multi-ethnic context, the descendants of indentured Indian labourers had long lobbied to participate as full and inclusive members of the legislature, executive, and overall socio-political life of the state; and immediately prior to coups, they had taken over the reins of politics in the opinion of many. These coups can be said to echo Smootha's (1997) concept of ethnic democracy, which he originally articulated in relation to Israel. By contrast with Fiji's earlier coups, the country's 2006 coup subverted this logic in powerful ways, as the indigenous Fijian-dominated army overthrew an indigenous Fijian government (e.g., Naidu 1988, Lal 2001, Rakuita 2002, and Lawson 2012).

Coups in Myanmar, most recently in February 2021, are of a different nature to



those in Fiji in that they do not cohere around or symbolise ethnic or populist ideals. They conform more readily to political science theories of coups as a struggle between military and civilian elites and can cause a levelling of internal ethnic rivalries in the process. In the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, we bear witness to yet another set of complex coup dynamics, in which its supporters cited the erosion of secularism and democracy in the country as a causal factor while the aftermath brought to the fore Islamist elite power struggles.

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This whistle-stop tour of just some coups that have taken place or were attempted in recent years illustrates how they are more than just abrupt seizures of democratic power. Each coup is historically, socially, culturally entangled. Each emerges from within a specific set of contexts, meanings, experiences, and practices. Each produces and is produced by powerful affects; and resonates as well as being resisted. Each reorients the lives of the state and of the people in it, in ways that are euphoric for some and enervating for others. And each reverberates into the future. Typologies of coups and coup databases do not capture this messiness and complexity, nor do they seem to be able to marshal the diversity of coups into any meaningful kind of comparative analysis, as noted by Powell and Thyne (2011). So, might there be a role for anthropology and ethnography in contributing to the endeavour? Yes.

I propose an ethnographic approach to coups that acknowledges and examines (1) their emergence, and the difference that they imagine making to the life and leadership and trajectory of the state, and the moral discourses that are used to frame them; (2) the ways in which they resonate with some people, and are resisted by others, whether through a clash of ideas, values, or people's grounded everyday realities – which opens coups up to examination not merely in terms of what they do to/in the world but the agency of those who experience them and engage with them; and (3) their reverberations in time and space, after



democratic processes and practices resume.

Ethnography enables us to tear our gaze away from the evenemential to understand how coups draw on the past and the future in the present and circulate along powerful political ideals, identities, and emotions; and how they are readily acted upon (and reacted to) by people whose grounded realities and relationships corroborate or question coup rhetoric, even as their lives and futures are radically transformed by coups years and decades later.

Studying coups along these vectors emerged through my engagement with Fiji and its people. This approach was – ironically – facilitated by some of the very quirks and limitations of ethnographic practice. For example, whereas political science colleagues may study ‘critical events’ (Das 1995) from afar, the centrality of long-term, immersive, and embedded ethnographic fieldwork renders it a matter of some serendipity for a fieldworker to be in situ as a coup occurs. Mostly, we enter the pre- or post-coup field, such that what comes into view is not the event of the coup itself but its antecedents and/or its impacts, i.e., we may see the intensities of political tensions beforehand and/or how a coup has folded itself into the political and social life of the state and into people’s relationships, hopes, fears, behaviours, and memories afterwards.



Hibiscus Festival in Fiji, 1960s. [Photo](#) by [Brett Jordan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

I originally set out to study multi-ethnic relations in an urban lifeworld in Fiji, noting that the literature on this was scant to non-existent. It turned out that I could not do this meaningfully without attending to Fiji's coups, which continued to frame political and public discourse, and it turned out relationships and lived experiences. Ethnographic realities rather than preconceived notions of what a coup is and does opened up profound methodological, epistemological, and conceptual implications.

And yet, I have long remained wedded to political science theories of coups. Not so much in terms of framing them as an aspect of military-civilian struggle for power – especially given that the 1987 and 2000 coups in Fiji pivoted quite clearly on issues of ontological indigenous security – but certainly in believing that for a coup to be a coup required military involvement. Yet when events unfolded in and at the US Capitol on 6th January 2021, exchanges with colleagues revealed to me that I held specific and closed ideas of what is a coup, and had retreated to a kind of essentialist attitude to these phenomena that was in fact of a typological nature rather than reflective of ethnographic realities.



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On 6th January 2021, the US Congress convened to certify the electoral college votes cast some weeks earlier naming Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the incoming President and Vice-President respectively. The certification process is part of the rituals associated with U.S. elections, which runs from early November through to mid-January and follows a stepwise process that moves from citizen voting, through to electoral college voting, certification, and finally inauguration. Each step in the process represents a gradual narrowing of the number of people empowered to elect the President. At the certification stage, power rests in the hands of members of Congress. And Republicans had long been stating that they would vote to reject the electoral college votes that had been cast in the states where these were won by the Biden-Harris campaign. This of course is their prerogative, and to do so would not appear to constitute illegal or unconstitutional behaviour. But in the sense that certifying the electoral college votes is regarded as largely symbolic, the threat to reject them went against the spirit of U.S. electoral democracy rituals. Suddenly, a rubber-stamp non-event turned into an event of epic proportions, televised and streamed live by US news channels with commentaries falling in favour of either the Republicans or the Democrats and expounding the narrative of the stolen election by the former, and incredulity at the attack on democracy by the latter.



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When the extent of Republican refusal to concede the election became clear, commentators – politicians, analysts, media, and the public alike – began referring to it as an attempted coup. Such sentiments and analyses were powerfully reinforced by the shocking scenes of Trump supporters storming the US Capitol; I watched in real-time along with colleagues in Brazil, Ethiopia, and the UK, sharing thoughts and questions over WhatsApp. Intrigued and appalled, we wondered what sense to make of what we were seeing and hearing in our remit as ethnographers of parliaments and political relationships. Given my background studying coups, my colleagues were keen to know at what point I would acknowledge what was happening as a coup.

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The U.S. military did not play a part in the events of that day. Indeed, top military leaders publicly denounced the storming of the Capitol via joint statements as



well as messages to the troops. The primary locus of the so-called coup activity comprised the American citizens who climbed the ramparts of the building, smashed windows, left urine and faecal matter in hallways, sat in the seats of elected power, took and posted photographs of themselves across social media, and proclaimed to reporters that they were taking back “their” House. And they were preceded and followed in their efforts to interrupt democracy by Republican congresspeople and senators who waged war within the Capitol building against the ritual of certifying the electoral college votes.

In the WhatsApp conversations with my colleagues, I long maintained that the lack of military intervention or involvement signalled clearly that what was happening in no way constituted a coup. My reference points for this view were my own research on Fiji’s 1987 and 2000 coups and established scholarship (e.g. Finer 1962, Huntington 1956 and 1968, Janowitz 1977, Luttwak 1969, and Nordlinger 1977). As noted earlier, scholars of coups locate these critical political events in an elite struggle between military and civilian leaders to define and shape the telos of the state based on notions of group identities and rights to the state as a kind of resource. Fiji proved the cliché that power comes from the barrel of a gun: (twice) in 1987, then again in 2000, and most recently in 2006 (e.g. Robertson/Sutherland 2001, Ratuva 2007 and 2011, Fraenkel et al. 2009, and Fraenkel 2013). The USA in my estimation did not.

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My colleagues on WhatsApp were determined to call what was unfolding a coup, as did various media outlets, even as the language of domestic terrorism and insurrection were applied interchangeably – indicating that what was at stake after all was democracy, and the methods of achieving its downfall were epiphenomenal. I was reminded that a purist definition of a coup as military overthrow is no longer consistently used. In Brazil, former President Dilma Rousseff referred to her impeachment as a coup. Following his election as the



U.K.'s Prime Minister, Boris Johnson mounted an attack against the impartiality of the judiciary, leading to whispers of a coup. In the same vein, attempts by the Leader of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, and of House Democrats on 13 January 2021 to remove the sitting U.S. President via impeachment were interpreted as a coup by many a Republican. These examples all depart quite comprehensively from traditional typologies of coups. So where does this leave and lead the anthropologist and ethnographer of coups – when the ostensible object of our research refuses to be pinned down as it were?

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If, on the one hand, coups pivot on military-civilian struggle for power, then I can reasonably claim that the object of my research is coups in the classic political science sense. If, on the other hand, I approach coups in terms of their emergence, resonance/resistance, and reverberations, and hence their historical, social, cultural entanglements, then this not only places coups in broader flows and contexts, but it also asks to take seriously those eventful phenomena that may not be coups in the strict sense but are perceived and experienced as such. As Julia Paley observes, in her introduction to *Democracy: Anthropological Approaches* (2008): while definitions of democracy tend to be a preferred starting point for many, she and her fellow contributors to the book 'take a different approach, one that engages in a continuing process of exploring a wide variety of lived meanings and practices.' Which is to say that '[t]he precise phenomenon we are studying is not predetermined but rather emerges within the various field sites in which we do our research' and is explored through dialogic engagement and analytical openness (2008: 5). For us as anthropologists to engage ethnographically with coups means to attend to our interlocutors' meanings, experiences, and practices vis-à-vis what they imagine and interpret as coups; and to bring this diversity together through collaborative anthropological exchange and debate.



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Podcast

Here is the [ResonanceCast podcast](#) where Jastinder Kaur discusses further on the topic of 'Incitement and Coups' with Daniel White, moderated by Ian M. Cook. You can also listen to our other podcasts at the [Allegra Lab soundcloud](#).

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