

CAN THERE BE A GOOD COUP?

By Alexander Noyes

On October 31, 2014, Blaise Compaoré, president of Burkina Faso since 1987, [resigned](#) after widespread protests over his attempt to extend his time in office. In the ensuing power vacuum, the military took over. Lt. Col. Isaac Zida pledged to return the country to civilian rule and [agreed](#) in principle to a transitional plan on November 9, but an interim leader has not yet been named. Although there is [disagreement](#) on whether the situation in Burkina Faso fits the strict definition of a military coup, these events, along with the [coup](#) in Niger in 2010, have prompted debates over whether some coups can be “good.” That is, can coups, which are inherently undemocratic, in fact help foster transitions toward democracy in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes? [more...](#)



A car burns outside the parliament building in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on October 30, 2014, as people protest against longtime President Blaise Compaoré, who seeks another term. Protesters dragged furniture and computers onto the street and set the main chamber ablaze, in the most significant challenge to the president's rule during his 27 years in power. (Source: AP Photo/Theo Renault.)

Alexander Noyes is an Adjunct Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

ARE MEDICAL RESEARCH FACILITIES IN AFRICA SECURE ENOUGH?

By Dr. Ashley Neese Bybee

The Ebola pandemic that is currently devastating three countries in West Africa raises a question that some [experts](#) have been asking for years: Are Africa's medical research facilities adequately secured? When then-U.S. Senator Richard Lugar, co-sponsor of legislation that created the threat-reduction program in 1991 (aimed at eliminating the threat from nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons in the former Soviet Union), visited several medical research facilities in East Africa in 2010, he characterized the security situation as a “[potentially disastrous predicament](#).” Moreover, the presence of active terrorist groups that may have educated operatives capable of infiltrating government facilities underscores the importance of securing deadly pathogens in research facilities. [more...](#)



Unidentified technicians at Kenya Medical Research Institute at Kenyatta National Hospital testing samples of powder found in suspicious mail for the bacteria that causes anthrax. (Source: AP Photo/Khalil Senosi.)

Dr. Ashley Neese Bybee is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

About IDA

The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

CAN THERE BE A GOOD COUP?

By Alexander Noyes

On October 31, 2014, Blaise Compaoré, president of Burkina Faso since 1987, [resigned](#) after widespread protests over his attempt to extend his time in office. In the ensuing power vacuum, the military took over. Lt. Col. Isaac Zida pledged to return the country to civilian rule and [agreed](#) in principle to a transitional plan on November 9, but an interim leader has not yet been named. Although there is [disagreement](#) on whether the situation in Burkina Faso fits the strict definition of a military coup, these events, along with the [coup](#) in Niger in 2010, have prompted debates over whether some coups can be “good.” That is, can coups, which are inherently undemocratic, in fact help foster transitions toward democracy in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes?

Recent academic research on the topic departs from conventional understanding of coups as always bad. In a 2014 [study](#) published in the journal *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Clayton Thyne and Jonathan Powell argue that while coups are always harmful to democracies, only 16.9 percent of all coups and coup attempts from 1950 through 2008 occurred under democratic rule. According to Thyne and Powell, the rest occurred under semi-authoritarian or deeply authoritarian regimes, and, contrary to conventional wisdom, coups often actually lead to democratic transitions in authoritarian states. They [assert](#), “Successful coups should promote democratization because leaders have incentives to democratize quickly in order to establish political legitimacy and economic growth.”

In addition, Thyne and Powell [argue](#) that coups sometimes provide a necessary “shock” to push authoritarian states toward democracy: “though history is unfortunately replete with examples of coup leaders who chose to consolidate their power and continue authoritarianism following a successful coup, many others have chosen to enact meaningful reforms toward democratization—reforms that would have been wholly unlikely in the absence of a successful coup.” They offer the coups in Mali in 1991 and Portugal in 1974 as examples of “good” coups. The authors also posit, perhaps overoptimistically, that even failed coup attempts can help foster democratic transitions under authoritarianism, although through a different process: “we view failed coups as credible signals that leaders must enact meaningful reforms to remain in power.”

In another recent study published in the *British Journal of Political Science* in 2013, Nikolay Marinov and Hein Goemans make similar claims, [finding](#) that the majority of successful coups since the end of the Cold War have led to competitive elections, not consolidated military regimes. This finding leads the authors to conclude that “the new generation of coups has been far less harmful for democracy than their historical predecessors.” Marinov and Goemans argue that leverage from international actors—specifically, aid conditionality—has been highly influential in bringing about such outcomes: “outside incentives have profoundly altered the calculus of rulers who formerly took power in order to maintain it. Somewhat paradoxically, it may be precisely those rulers (coup makers) who are most vulnerable to outside pressure; conditionality has the best chance in those cases.”

The article by Thyne and Powell suffers from a lack of discussion of detailed causal mechanisms, which would help further explain and test how their theory works on the micro level. With a focus on coups and democratization, the article also does not investigate whether coups may lead to a deepening of authoritarian rule. That said, both studies offer compelling evidence that the conventional wisdom on coups and democracy needs to be rethought, particularly regarding authoritarian regimes. Both studies thankfully do not celebrate coups, but argue that post-coup moments offer windows of opportunity for democratic opening.



A car burns outside the parliament building in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on October 30, 2014, as people protest against longtime President Blaise Compaoré, who seeks another term. Protesters dragged furniture and computers onto the street and set the main chamber ablaze, in the most significant challenge to the president's rule during his 27 years in power. (Source: AP Photo/Theo Renaut.)

The outcome of Burkina Faso's leadership transition remains highly uncertain. The studies highlighted above, however, suggest that not only is a return to civilian rule and the staging of competitive elections possible, but that the international community holds a significant amount of leverage—aid conditionality in particular—that could help bring about a more robust democratic transition in the country.

Given the highly uncertain nature and potentially costly unintended consequences of coups, international actors would be wise to continue to condemn them unequivocally. Many Western governments (including the [United States](#)) and international organizations bar assistance and membership to coup leaders, but as noted by Thyne and Powell, such policies often only apply to the overthrow of leaders in democracies (U.S. [law](#), for instance, applies to the overthrow of “duly elected” heads of government). Because the above research suggests that coups in authoritarian states may lead to democratization and the international community has leverage in such moments, once coups occur, policymakers may therefore want to consider new ways to wield such leverage on coup leaders in authoritarian regimes, as opposed to universally isolating them. Potential tools of influence could include engagement, including discussions of future conditional assistance.

Alexander Noyes is an Adjunct Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

ARE MEDICAL RESEARCH FACILITIES IN AFRICA SECURE ENOUGH?

By Dr. Ashley Neese Bybee

The Ebola pandemic that is currently devastating three countries in West Africa raises a question that some [experts](#) have been asking for years: Are Africa's medical research facilities adequately secured? When then-U.S. Senator Richard Lugar, co-sponsor of legislation that created the threat-reduction program in 1991 (aimed at eliminating the threat from nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons in the former Soviet Union), visited several medical research facilities in East Africa in 2010, he characterized the security situation as a "[potentially disastrous predicament](#)." Moreover, the presence of active terrorist groups that may have educated operatives capable of infiltrating government facilities underscores the importance of securing deadly pathogens in research facilities.



Unidentified technicians at Kenya Medical Research Institute at Kenyatta National Hospital testing samples of powder found in suspicious mail for the bacteria that causes anthrax. (Source: AP Photo/Khalil Senosi.)

Background

There are several government laboratories in Africa that house deadly infectious diseases. For example, the Uganda Virus Research Institute and the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), two of the continent's most advanced labs, are [reported](#) to contain samples of Ebola, Marburg virus, Rift Valley fever, plague, and anthrax. Unfortunately, these are not small, numbered samples. Because of their antiquated equipment, African scientists need to use [large samples](#) for their research, thus potentially increasing opportunities for accidents or theft. In 2010, the Director of KEMRI admitted that security at his lab was "[average](#)." One U.S. Government official accompanying former Senator Lugar lamented that security would be too weak to prevent unauthorized access by [terrorists](#).

Weaponizing a Pathogen

The potential threat posed by unsecured and/or unaccounted-for deadly pathogens is therefore [significant](#). In addition to accidents due to neglect or lax security protocols, the possibility exists for the production of a bioweapon by extremist individuals or groups. A bioweapon might come in the form of an inanimate object that disperses a deadly pathogen or an individual who deliberately infects himself (or another person) with the intent to spread a disease. The former requires some significant scientific and technical expertise, but the latter only requires someone to steal a pathogen, infect himself or another, then seek to transmit the disease to others. Although weaponizing a pathogen is not easy, in an age where some terrorists are [highly educated](#), including in the sciences and engineering, it is not implausible that somebody might attempt to do so.

Security: Access Control and the Insider Threat

Physical-access control is just one aspect of security; there is also the need to protect against insider threats in labs that house deadly pathogens. Without adequate vetting and extensive background checks, highly skilled terrorist operatives could plausibly establish themselves in a lab's organizational structure and use the knowledge, equipment, and materials at their disposal to produce a bioweapon.

Looking Ahead

Africans have not yet experienced a biological terrorist attack or a major man-made biological disaster, notwithstanding conspiracy [theories](#) that the current Ebola pandemic is the result of negligent handling of pathogens that were housed in the region. Nonetheless, securing deadly pathogens seems like commonsense protection against such possibilities. The United States and other developed nations might consider contributing to threat-reduction activities in Africa, working alongside African partners to assess and address these biological vulnerabilities.

On a related note, some [experts](#) assert that progress toward creating an Ebola vaccine might be further along had the international community been studying how terrorists might weaponize Ebola. Producing a vaccine for a rare disease originating in the developing world unsurprisingly has not passed the market test for commercial development. The question now is: What can and should be done to offset this market reality and to hedge against the future use of Ebola as a terrorist instrument?

Dr. Ashley Neese Bybee is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.
