Periphery Praetorianism in Cliometric Perspective 1855-1985

DAVID KOWALEWSKI*

ABSTRACT

Violent attempts by military forces to assume state power have been common throughout history. In recent centuries, however, the phenomenon has seemed more prevalent and seemingly systematic, especially in developing or "periphery" nations. Whereas modernization theory views coup attempts as deviant happenings occurring randomly on the periphery's road to democratic development, world-system theory implies a more structured set of events. Hypotheses concerning the trending and cycling of coups are derived from the world-system perspective. Accordingly, coups are expected to have increased over time, and to have accelerated in years of Kondratieff contractions, hegemonic demise, and colonial decline. The hypotheses are tested with data on 34 periphery nations for 1855-1985, using controls for nonelite turmoil, terror, and revolution. Coup attempts revealed substantial secular trending. Little cyclical variation was evident, although unsuccessful coups were somewhat more widespread in Kondratieff expansions, and successful coups were more prevalent in years of extensive terrorist activities. The findings provide little evidence for the modernizationist school, but some moderate support for the world-system perspective.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE concept "praetorianism" reveals its ancient origin. As Max Weber noted, the power of the state rests ultimately on maintaining a monopoly of coercion. Military forces, while normally attending to professional duties, occasionally attempt to assume state power when ruling authorities are perceived as incapable of governing (Godwin, 1976; Morrison and Stevenson, 1974).

Impressionistic evidence from recent history, however, suggests that praetorianism, especially in developing or "periphery" nations, has not only become more common, but also has been structured by broader global dynamics. The present study investigates the historical pathways of military coups in the periphery, in order to examine the extent to which such structuring has in fact occurred.

* Social Science Division, Alfred University, Alfred, New York 14802, U.S.A.
Contrasting Perspectives on Praetorianism

To theorists of the modernizationist school of development, coups in the periphery during the postcolonial era are simply a function of inexperience with democratic processes (Mackensie, 1967; Palmer, 1975; Smith, 1960). Newly independent nations must struggle to institutionalize nonviolent, democratic forms of politics (Huntington, 1968). Sporadic disruptions will occur. Thus, military forces will occasionally intervene to restore order in accordance with their professional mandate.

Yet such events, according to modernization theorists, are random, deviant occurrences driven by local, indigenous breakdowns of immature political institutions. In the postcolonial era, periphery nations are largely autonomous and responsible for their political destinies. Developed or "core" nations, their former colonizers, simply assist them in their democratic striving whenever possible. Political learning by the periphery will eventually take place as democratic core institutions trickle down and become established. As periphery nations model their politics after the core's, their militaries will increasingly remain in the barracks. In fact, the military has become one of the most modern sectors of periphery societies. In some nations they have actively assisted civilian economic authorities by sponsoring development (infrastructural projects, civic action programs). Indeed, some modernizationists (Pye, 1990) have hailed the decline of military rule and the surge of presumably democratic elections across the periphery in the 1980s as a "vindication of modernization theory."

The world-system and related dependency schools have sharply criticized this claim. They assert that such a view is as historically myopic and empirically baseless as it is selfserving. A good deal of counterfactual evidence is available. For example, many Latin American nations, "independent" for two centuries, have experienced frequent coup attempts in recent decades. A longer diachronic perspective and empirical research are necessary before any "counter-praetorian wave" can be evidenced.

World-system theorists stress the persistent dominant-subordinate structure of core-periphery relations, which has kept the periphery dependent and underdeveloped relative to the core. Since core nations exploit the periphery for the sake of capital-accumulation, repression by military forces is frequently necessary. Access to raw materials and markets, low-wage labor, sites for military bases and other motives often require military power to protect the dependent state from nationalist and socialist challenges from below. The core not only tolerates, but indeed at times actively sponsors, military coups. Its own military interventions into periphery nations to "protect lives and property" during the history of the world-system suggests, at the least, that capitalist stability is a higher priority than democratic development. Politics in the periphery is structured far differently than politics in the core. Military coups are normal, not deviant, cases. They are not "withering away" with modernization.