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A Brief History of the Coup d'État in the Asia-Pacific

Across Asia in the 20th and 21st centuries, the coup d'état has been a well-documented phenomenon.

By Ankit Panda
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We're still trying to make sense of what exactly transpired in Turkey starting Friday evening, when certain parts of the Turkish military staged what appeared to be the country's fourth military coup since 1960. Their attempt failed, with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reasserting his authority after widespread public resistance to the military's attempts to coercively seize control of the government. The coup attempt was far from bloodless, with Turkish authorities estimating nearly 300 fatalities and more than 1,000 injured due to coup-related violence.

Coups aren't a new phenomenon in Turkey by any means, but that's not to say that anyone saw Friday's attempt coming. Turkey last saw what some analysts have described as a post-modern coup in 1997, when the Turkish military issued a memorandum containing several demands that the government of then-Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan was forced to comply with. (Erbakan himself resigned.) Though the country has seen democratic regression and creeping authoritarianism under Erdogan, 19 years of uninterrupted democratic politics since the 1997 memorandum were interrupted by Friday's coup attempt.

Coup d'états—the seizure of the state by the military or another coterie of power-seeking elites—have been a moving force in global history throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. In the Asia-Pacific, our region of interest here at *The Diplomat*, coups have ebbed and flowed, but certainly

marked transformative turning points for several of the region's countries in the 20th century. Here are some of the coups, attempted coups, and organized conspiracies to overthrow governments that Asia-Pacific states have seen.

21st Century

Since 2000, the Asia-Pacific has seen few notable coups and attempted coups outside of Thailand, which saw two within a span of eight years. The Thai military coups of 2006 and 2014 marked the 11th and 12th coups since the country's first in 1932. Both coups deposed democratically elected governments—the first ousting Thaksin Shinawatra and the second, his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. Thai coups, unlike those in Turkey and several other states, have had the unique feature of operating within proscribed limits; notably, Thai military coup leaders—Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha most recent among them—have left the authority of the Thai monarchy in place. In 2014, after scrapping the country's 2007 constitution, Prayut left the second chapter, concerning the king's role, intact. Prayut's government has promised a return to democracy under a new constitution, but considerable uncertainty persists over the junta's promised timetable; a general election is promised for 2017.

In addition to Thailand, Fiji saw two successful coups in 2000 and in 2006. The 2000 attempt was carried out by civilian nationalists against an elected government led by an ethnic Indian. The 2006 coup, meanwhile, represented a continuation of the tensions that had led to the 2000 coup. Where Thailand saw successful coup attempts after 2000, three Asia-Pacific countries—Bangladesh, Laos, and the Philippines—saw either unsuccessful attempts or unsuccessful conspiracies before a coup. In December 2011, Bangladesh was poised to see its fourth successful coup in its short 45 years of independence, following two successful coups in 1975 and one in 1982. Intervention within the Bangladeshi military thwarted the attempt by hard-line Islamist military officers and kept the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in place. (More recently, Bangladesh has seen tensions flare nationwide along the Islamism versus secularism fault-line.)

While Laos never saw a full-on attempted coup, in 2007, the United States alleged that a former Lao Army general living in exile in the United States, Vang Pao, had conspired to amass weaponry to eventually overthrow the Communist government. In 2009, the U.S. government dropped charges against Vang Pao, which had been brought under the Neutrality Act (the Act prohibits U.S. citizens from supporting the overthrow of a government at peace with the United States). In 2006, then-Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo declared emergency rule, saying that her government had foiled a conspiracy to overthrow her government. The emergency lasted for just over a week and was one in many controversies marking Arroyo's presidency. Additionally, just last year, rumors circulated that a coup was brewing in the Philippines to overthrow President Benigno Aquino III, but the country's military quickly quashed those suggestions.

One more Asian country, Timor-Leste, saw in 2008 what some have described as a coup attempt, but the incident has also been described as a botched assassination attempt. In 2008, Timorese soldiers, rising up against the state, took then-President José Ramos-Horta and then-Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão into custody in their homes; the former was shot and wounded in the

incident. Gusmão described the incident as a coup attempt, but the rebel's intentions were unknown, with some suggesting that the incident was a botched kidnapping attempt.

Finally, in 2002 and 2005, Nepal's King Gyanendra pulled two "self-coups," dismissing the country's democratically elected legislators and expanding his own powers. Gyanendra's "self-coup" represented a moment of ill-advised monarchic overreach that ultimately led to the dissolution of the 240-year-old monarchy in 2008, when Nepal was instead declared a federal democratic republic.

20th Century

The 20th century, marked by Imperialism, world wars, decolonization, state-creation, and later, democratization, saw the creation and overthrow of several governments, some through coups. For reasons of scope, I won't go into a comprehensive account of coups in Asia then, but, certainly, coups have played a critical role in the history of numerous states in the region. (Thailand, as mentioned above, saw ten 20th century coup, beginning in 1932.)

In East Asia, China, Japan, and South Korea saw numerous coup attempts, with the latter experiencing two significant attempts after World War II. Japan, in the years between 1931 and the September 1945 surrender after the war, saw seven failed coup attempts. In China, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912 and before the creation of the People's Republic in 1949, several coups and attempted coups took place, involving everything from attempts by Qing loyalists to overthrow early Nationalist governments, led by the Kuomintang, to Zhang Xueliang's kidnapping of Chiang Kai-shek in 1936, urging him to form a united front with the Communists against the Japanese threat. Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, China has seen no successful coups, though factionalism and clique-based leadership struggle certainly play a role in intra-Party politics. There have, however, been reports of attempted coups, with the most notable incident involving Marshal Lin Biao, once the right-hand man of Mao Zedong. Lin perished in an airplane crash in 1971 — supposedly after a botched coup attempt though details remain unclear over 40 years later.

In South Korea, successful coups defined a large portion of the country's post-Korean War history. Park Chung-hee, the country's authoritarian president from 1963 to 1979, and Chun Doo-hwan, the president from 1980 to 1988, seized power through coups. Park, though responsible for numerous rights violations, is credited with overseeing South Korea's planned economic miracle that led to the country's incredible economic growth. Since the establishment of the Sixth Republic and the transition to democracy, South Korea has seen no coups or attempted coups.

In South Asia and Burma (today known as Myanmar), following decolonization and the departure of the British, coups have been a regular occurrence. Burma, in 1962, saw Nu, a democratically elected leader, overthrown by Ne Win, leading to 49 years of direct military rule until the current period of cautious democratic return, beginning in 2011. Pakistan, meanwhile, is also no stranger to military rule, having seen civilian governments repeatedly overthrown by its often ambitious chiefs of army staff (COAS). The country's 2013 elections marked the first successful democratic transfer of power between two civilian governments since its

independence in 1947. In the aftermath of Turkey's Friday coup, several Pakistani commentators have wondered if the country's current COAS, General Raheel Sharif, may reconsider his plans to abstain from seeking an extension of his term this November.

India, the largest and most populous state in South Asia and the world's largest democracy, has seen no coups in its post-independence history. Unlike other post-colonial democracies in South Asia, early Indian statesmen took a particular interest in "coup-proofing" the country. By 1970, the Indian Army had been constrained by a range of democratic checks and balances that would ensure the primacy of civilian rule, leaving it a regional exception (PDF) to regular coups in its neighborhood. (Indian democracy saw its own non-coup testing by other means, notably Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's infamous "Emergency" from 1975 to 1977.)

Elsewhere in Asia, coups came to alter the course of history. In South Vietnam, the country's first post-independence president, Ngo Dinh Diem, was overthrown in 1963 by General Dương Văn Minh, with the United States' understanding and support. In Indonesia, Suharto's overthrow of Sukarno, the country's first prime minister, in 1965 was a seminal event, whose reverberations were felt until the very end of the 20th century as Suharto ruled for 31 years. In Cambodia, then co-premier Hun Sen, in a civilian coup, ousted Norodom Ranariddh, establishing himself as the country's incumbent prime minister to this day.

What transpired in Turkey on Friday has gotten the world talking about coups and their unpredictability once again. In the Asia-Pacific, as leaders react to the failed Turkish attempt, there'll be plenty of history to reflect on. Asian political history has all too often seen conspiratorial maneuvering by military and civilian leaders alike to coercively seize the instruments and institutions of state power. Where these coups have succeeded, they've often turned the course of history.