

Saviors or Spoilers? Explaining “Civil Society Coups” among Democratizing Regimes

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream literature on civil society has emphasized its positive impact on democratization. However, some democratizing regimes have experienced civil society mobilization that resulted to the ouster of elected leaders. These “civil society coups” cast doubt on their status as unconditional defenders of democracy. This outcome is due to a conjunction of several conditions such as: anti-systemic leadership, failure of democratic accountability institutions, and a moderating form of military intervention. A comparative analysis of the Philippines, Venezuela, and Thailand is undertaken to test this argument. It concludes that civil society actions could generate unintended consequences detrimental to democratization.

Keywords: *democratization; civil society, coups d'état, Southeast Asia*

Introduction

Civil society has been proclaimed as a “great democratizing force” largely because of its pivotal role in dramatic episodes of “people power”, colored revolutions, and popular mobilization of ordinary citizens against authoritarian regimes. After the dust of democratic transitions have settled, these organizations have been capable of limiting state power, fostering political accountability of elites, increasing political participation, and enriching associational life (Diamond, 1999; Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006; Putnam, 1993; Schmitter, 1995; Tusalem, 2007). However, not all civil societies across the developing world behave as consistent defenders of the democratic order as they are assumed to be. There is a recent phenomenon in several fledgling democratic regimes wherein during extraordinary times (Bermeo, 2003), the mobilization of civil society and their collaboration with other political actors have caused political instability, and in several occasions even resulted in the removal of elected leaders.

Since the heyday of coups in the early post-war era, there has been a considerable decline of coup activity in the developing world attributed to the global

diffusion of democratic rule and the end of Cold War superpower rivalry (Hagopian, 2005). However, this general observation could not be reconciled with recent coup successes among transitioning regimes. According to Powell and Thyne, “[t]welve of the eighteen (67%) coup attempts since [2003] have been successful, and only one of the most recent four coup attempts has failed” (2011 p.256). A closer look reveals that ten of the newest coup incidences have some element of protest, demonstration, and societal mobilization. Instead of asking what could explain the decline of coups, the appropriate inquiry should concern the reasons behind coup success despite the global diffusion of democracy.

Under what conditions does civil society mobilize against democratically-constituted governments? What motivates them to align with strange bedfellows like traditional politicians and military officers in challenging the political legitimacy of incumbents? Are such movements launched by civil society expressions of popular sovereignty and active political participation or a display of mob rule, wanton disregard for the rule of law, or political decay? These questions have come to the fore of democratization debates in recent years given the occurrence of what Encarnación (2002) described as “civil society coups” where actions by groups claiming to embody civil society have contested the legitimacy of chief executives, with varying results (Abente Brun, 1999; Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, 2010; Kasuya, 2003; Buitrago, 2010; Thompson, 2003).

Informed by cumulative knowledge on coups and other kinds of political crises (Hochstetler, 2006; Huntington, 1968; Linz, 1978; Pérez-Liñán, 2007), the central argument is composed of two analytically distinct but theoretically interconnected parts. The first is that civil society coups become the means to remove executives in democratizing regimes that possess several *necessary* conditions. These are the presence of (1) an anti-systemic executive in power; (2) weak democratic institutions unable to hold the incumbent accountable; and (3) a moderating form of military intervention. This “causal recipe” (Ragin, 2008) is derivative of the inexorably-linked decisions and actions of the incumbent, the political opposition, the different formations within civil society, and the military leadership.

Guided by the logic of the “most-different” comparative research design (Przeworski and Teune, 1970), this article compares how civil society coups in three cases of executive removal. These are the ouster of Joseph Estrada the Philippines (2001), Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand (2006), and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (2002)¹ necessarily possessed all of the above-mentioned causal conditions while having differences in the other likely explanatory factors such as constitutional design, colonial legacies, level of economic development, military role and missions, etc. In order to account for factors that could intrinsic to these cases, this article also looks at other episodes of political conflict or democratic crises that did not result to civil society

coups within these three countries. By way of conclusion, this article explores future research directions.

Defining Civil Society and Civil Society Coups

Political scientists would agree that civil society is beset with a lot of conceptual ambiguities (Boussard, 2002). To simplify, the debate on defining civil society could be represented by two camps – those that favor for a more exclusive or normatively guided definition and those that uses an inclusive or residual definition. The former restricts civil society to those who pass certain democratic “benchmarks” – respect for the rule of law, civility, or nonviolence (Whitehead, 2002). It is more “sensitive” to the protean nature of civil societies, especially those found in developing democracies that continue to have vestiges of traditional and authoritarian ways in their societies (Ekiert and Kubik, 2001; Beittinger-Lee 2009).

White’s definition of civil society provides the necessary conceptual flexibility for comparative analysis. It is “an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values” (2004 p.10).² The crucial attributes are autonomy, voluntarism, and collective interests. This conceptualization is blind to the actual goals and behavioral dispositions of civil society but at the same time, it distinguishes it from the state and political society (political parties and elites).³ It is more apt in democratizing societies since it appreciates the diverse composition of civil society as a collective of organizations that could be traditional or modern, formal or informal, advocacy or service-delivery oriented, status quo or transformative can co-exist. The essential factor is the fact that they consciously assume the identity of civil society and its interests as an actor in democratic politics.

The next issue that this article needs to address is how to define a civil society coup. It is an attempt to depose or remove an elected chief executive or government through extra-constitutional or undemocratic means (Encarnación, 2002 p.38) through efforts of actors such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), organized labor, social movements, and other entities normally defined as part of civil society. The mobilization of civil society, usually in the form of street protests and demonstrations, are often triggered by violations of human rights, a betrayal of public trust, corruption and other political scandals (Hochstetler, 2006). The main target of a civil society coup is normally the chief executive as head of the incumbent government. The final element of a civil society coup is some element of military intervention whether active collaboration with civil society actors, the withdrawal of allegiance or loyalty to the incumbent government, or the actual removal of the chief executive from office. It is considered successful if the incumbent chief executive or government is removed and

replaced through means outside the rules set by the constitutional framework of executive removal and leadership succession.

Table I: A Simple Typology of Executive Removal

	With military intervention	Without military intervention
With civil society mobilization	Civil Society Coup	Civilian Praetorianism
Without civil society mobilization	Military Coup	Institutional Removal (e.g., impeachment, vote of no confidence)

A civil society coup is only one of the many outcomes of executive removal. Table 1 shows a typology of crises that democratizing regimes could face depending on the involvement of civil society and/or the military. It becomes the means by which an executive is removed from power if there are three causal conditions that are present. The first is the collective mobilization by groups within civil society in the form of street protests, demonstrations, and other forms of contentious collective action. The second is that these actions appear after the failure or inability of democratic institutions to work. It might be a breakdown of accountability institutions and procedures (elections; impeachment, recall, investigations, etc.) or anti-democratic measures, policies, or political scandal associated with the incumbent leader or government. The failure of institutions and the mobilization of civil society demanding the removal of the incumbent government or its leadership could generate political stability and even a crisis of legitimacy. This leads to the final indicator – the overt intervention of the military in an attempt to resolve the crisis by executing a coup.

How is a civil society coup, then, differ from the “classical” definition of a coup d'état? There are two distinctions. The first is that the fact that democratic institutions or procedures failed to perform their functions or mandate which compels civil society to resort to extra-constitutional and therefore possibly undemocratic options. This implies that civil society actors have tried and exhausted existing institutional mechanisms as provided in the democratic regime. Not all military coups have this preliminary condition. It is only when civil society takes the lead in challenging the incumbent government that a civil society coup becomes possible. The second condition is the existence of linkages between civil society and the military exist. The extent of the relationship could vary from a palpable alliance between them or a mutual understanding of the possible negative repercussions of prolonging the leadership crisis. The former entails, the entire military, or its leadership, is a member of the “coup coalition” demanding for the removal of the executive. In this case, members of the military such as high-ranking officials are in alliance with civil society actors and opposition politicians against the incumbent. On the other hand, the military could not

form part of coalition but politically intervened as a way to resolve the impasse, often invoking their moderating power of guardianship function (Nordlinger, 1977).

A Conceptual Framework Explaining Civil Society Coups

This article argues that there are three causal conditions that are necessary in order for a civil society coup to take place. The first is the presence of a leadership that exhibits anti-systemic behavior. Encarnación (2002) argued that the rise of these democratically elected politicians is often the result of the dissatisfaction of the electorate with existing political parties and the failure of the political system to respond to social demands. These leaders often implement a populist agenda, use their powers to undermine or reduce existing rights and liberties. This often results in a “delegative democracy” (O’Donnell, 1994) that are in deficit in terms of liberal and republican principles such as constitutionalism, rule of law, political freedoms, transparency, and accountability. Another impact of this leadership is sociopolitical polarization. A polarized society exists when some sectors are in support of the incumbent and some are in the opposing camp where civil society and the political opposition are located. Some of the groups loyal to the government can also claim to represent civil society or ‘the people’.

The rise of such anti-systemic leadership that remains legitimate because it possessed an electoral mandate or popular support causes stress on the democratic polity, particularly to what O’Donnell (1999) called institutions of horizontal accountability. However, this kind of rule will only take a toll to the political system if there is the presence of weak political institutions capable of controlling the abuse of authority. These refers to legislative assemblies or judicial institutions but could also comprise actors belonging to “political society” (Linz and Stepan, 1996) such as political parties in the opposition. This weakness not only makes civil society the only remaining viable actor against the incumbent government but it also assumes that defending of the democratic order becomes their burden (Encarnación, 2002 p.39). Civil society becomes politicized in the full sense, replacing ineffective representative institutions and becoming a viable actor as institutions and procedures provided by the democratic regime fail to perform its functions. Such a contentious political episode makes extra-constitutional alternatives such as the political intervention by the military highly plausible.

The final condition for a civil society coup to occur is a military that had a past of intervention in politics. A past history of a military rebellion or coup against a government makes future intervention more likely, especially from the viewpoint of civil society (Belkin and Schofer, 2003). More than just the weight of the past, this historical legacy has something to do with the perceived role of the military as guardians of the nation-state and the democratic regime. A civil society coup happens

when the military responds to the provocations of civil society by disobeying the executive's command to repress the demonstrations, withdrawing their allegiance to the government, or "surgically" removing the chief executive (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas, 2010). The next section discusses the interplay of these causal conditions in three cases: the Philippines in 2001, Venezuela in 2002, and Thailand in 2006.

Civil Society Coups in Democratizing Regimes: The Philippines, Venezuela, and Thailand

The successful civil society coups launched against incumbent political leaders in the Philippines, Thailand, and Venezuela seemingly share certain conditions. Among them is the election of a powerful leader who garnered a strong electoral mandate on a platform of offering the populace an alternative to "business than usual" politics. All three chief executives – Estrada, Thaksin, and Chávez – challenged the existing political order by appealing directly to the masses, offering to give access, voice, and dignity to members of the popular sector who have been neglected by political elites for decades. They all sought to address the situation by challenging the political status quo, and reconfiguring power balances between political players thereby putting themselves and their allies as the new wielders of authority.

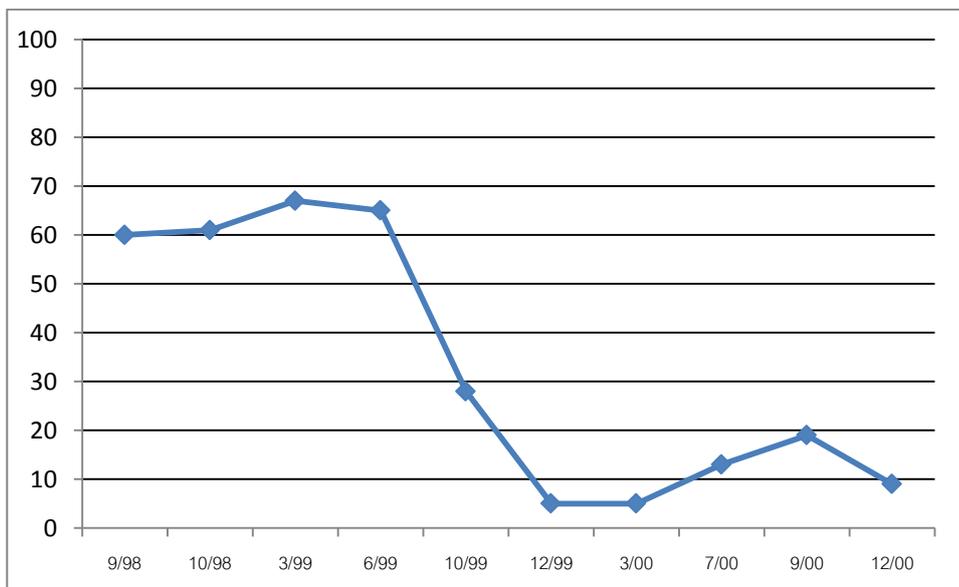
Unsurprisingly, these maneuvers were immediately met with resistance and antagonism from unsurprisingly the political opposition. However, it is when civil society got involved that things started to unravel. Their mobilization of protests was caused by a range of issues that included corruption scandals, controversial redistributive policies, abuses of power, and the repression of political dissent. The accountability mechanisms in all of these cases were activated, whether through an impeachment process, congressional investigation, and judicial review, to new elections. However, given the advantages and influence held by the incumbent leaders and the societal pressures exerted by civil society, these weak political institutions failed to perform their mandate. As constitutional options are apparently exhausted, actions by civil society, opposition politicians, military officials, and even members of the judiciary became part of the purported extra-constitutional solution to this democratic crisis.

*Estrada and People Power Redux in the Philippines (2001)*⁴

In 1998, Joseph Ejercito Estrada, a movie actor turned politician, was elected the 13th president of the Philippines by garnering 40 percent of the national vote. To a large extent, his relatively overwhelming electoral victory could be attributed to the support he received from the lower economic classes who constituted more than 70 percent of the country's population. Estrada's campaign slogan, *Erap para sa Mahirap* [Erap for the Poor] basically summarized his heavily populist political platform – a focus on the needs and issues of the often neglected Filipino popular sector. But he was

also was severely criticized on the basis of incompetence and the lack of moral qualifications⁵ to be the country’s chief executive. The mobilization of electoral support by an “unlikely” candidate – uneducated, lacking political pedigree, and without a strong party machinery – was unprecedented in Philippine politics since the time of former president Ramon Magsaysay in 1954. Two years into his term as president however, Estrada was forcibly ousted through a peaceful “People Power II” – the largest societal mobilization since the country’s “Yellow Revolution of 1986” – on grounds of cronyism and corruption. This happened after the breakdown of the political institutions charged to make Estrada accountable – the impeachment process – was incapable to deliver its promised mandate.

Estrada’s unpopular and divisive proposals such as to extending military honors to former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, allowing American military forces in the country, and amending the 1987 Constitution caused a lot of antagonism on several civil society organizations. However, it was the series of corruption scandals and exposés by media that served as the tipping point. While corruption could be considered as ordinary features of Philippine politics, the extent and details of Estrada’s abuse of power have more than disturbed popular sensitivity. The bribery and corruption allegations of a provincial governor who was considered to be one of Estrada’s cronies became the basis of an impeachment complaint that was hurriedly endorsed by the lower chamber of the legislature. By that time, public opinion was also dramatically changing against the president as seen in Figure 1. The popular and charismatic president was the first public official to be impeached in Philippine political history (Kasuya, 2003).



Source: Social Weather Stations

Figure 1: Approval Ratings of President Joseph Estrada, 1998-2001

The frequent and intensive protest actions by civil society groups served as background while the senators became Estrada's jurors in the impeachment trial. Mobilizations were primarily driven by leftist social movements, Church-based associations, and NGOs advocating for issues related to development, social justice, and democratic governance. Even if observers believed that the chances of an acquittal was great given that the Estrada had a considerable number of allies within the Senate who is now acting as an impeachment court. One of the broadest configurations of civil society groups called themselves the Congress of the Filipino People. Their leaders stated that they will allow this accountability mechanism to work with the hope of finally resolving what has become the gravest political crisis in post-Marcos Philippine politics. However, a blunder on the part of the president's defense lawyers and his allies in the jury resulted in an aborted impeachment trial.⁶

The maneuvering of several senator-jurors and their perceived bias for the President also validated the highly political nature of the impeachment mechanism. For civil society, it was an 'in-your-face' expression that political institutions are very much characterized by the prevalence of informal norms such as patronage, particularism, and personal loyalties. No amount of pressure and appeal to the public welfare exerted by civil society in the end was able to persuade these representatives of the people to heed their demands for fairness and integrity. It also manifested that the Senate as an accountability mechanism did not accomplish its responsibility as their partisan loyalties clouded their role as jurors and ultimately jeopardized their responsibility as custodians of the people's fiduciary trust. This inevitably resulted in a political vacuum that compelled civil society to use their weapon of last resort – to pour out into the streets and demand for Estrada's accountability (Arugay, 2005).

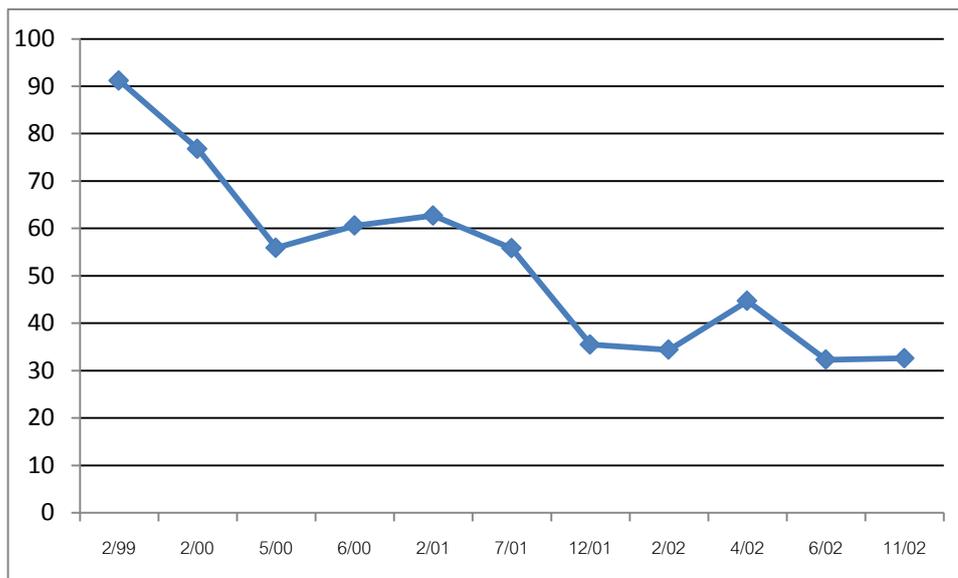
From January 17-20, 2001, hundreds of thousands of people led by a several civil society formations in alliance with the political opposition protested in the famous highway known as EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue), something reminiscent of the 1986 People Power Revolution that toppled the Marcos regime. Despite the appeal of Estrada for sobriety and even offering to call for new elections, the movement demanded for his resignation. As similar protests began to swell in other urban areas, the top brass of the military and police announced their withdrawal of allegiance from the president as commander-in-chief. Unlike the original People Power Revolt in 1986 where a breakaway military faction became the spark to a popular uprising, the 2001 version found the military reacting to the groundswell of popular outrage. Such abandonment constituted as the final blow to the beleaguered incumbent paving the way for Vice-President Gloria Arroyo to become the constitutional successor to the presidency. However, it is observable that the military figured prominently in both instances, acting as a spark for popular revolution in 1986 and a guardian and protector of the Philippine state and its people in 2001. The military establishment's decision to

abandon its democratically elected commander-in-chief was unprecedented in contemporary Philippine political history (Arugay, 2011).

Chávez and the Anti-Populist Coup in Venezuela (2002)

A few months after the hugely popular Estrada became president in the Philippines, across the Pacific, the election of Hugo Chávez as Venezuelan president was celebrated as a historical watershed. A former lieutenant colonel who led a failed coup in 1992, he symbolized the end of the *Punto Fijo* era as he won over the candidates of the two major parties that have dominated of Venezuelan politics since 1958. His victory is associated with popular discontent to the existing political class and by running on a campaign that sought to restore the dignity of the Venezuelan masses through what he called the “Bolivarian” revolution. For political analysts, the election of Chávez reflected the backlash of the subaltern classes and the popular sector that have been marginalized by the political system (Trinkunas, 2005). With no strong political party machinery to support him, he used his charismatic appeal as a way to communicate his populist agenda directly to the electorate. More importantly, Chávez promised to use the country’s bountiful oil revenues to combat poverty and social inequality, something that the 40-year old two-system of “partyarchy” (Coppedge, 1994) has failed to address.

The new president wasted no time implementing his vision of a new Venezuelan democratic order. According to McCoy and Myers (2006), a series of measures and decisions made by Chávez constituted the “unraveling” of liberal and representative democracy in the country. He made plans to revise the constitution, prosecute former officials for corruption, intervention in the organization of trade unions, and antagonism toward the critical media made him a highly polarizing leader among the populace (Coppedge, 2005). Like Estrada, Chávez failed to neither generate any positive economic impact nor deliver on his other promises. On the contrary, the country plunged into the worst crisis in 30 years due to capital flight and widespread unemployment. While oil prices have plunged during this time, it did not help that the president’s move to nationalize of the oil industry resulted in a decline of productivity (Encarnación, 2002). His approval ratings also started to dip as by the middle of 2001.



Source: Datánalisis

Figure 2: Approval Ratings of President Hugo Chávez, 1999-2002

It should be noted that Chávez only hastened the decay of political institutions in Venezuela. The president's overhaul of democratic institutions and rules did not generate much antagonism from the public who saw that the brand of democracy that they were patronizing did not produce favorable political and economic outcomes (Crisp, 2000). On the part of the opposition, there was no attempt to check Chávez's power accountable since his presidency has eliminated the prospect of activating institutions of accountability (Coppedge, 2005). The political opposition deemed the institutional route as a "dead end" which then opened the possibilities for an extra-constitutional alternative (Coronil, 2011).

The contentious political episode started with Chávez's dismissal of officials from the national oil company's trade union which was considered a violation of its autonomy. This became a political opportunity for other civil society organizations and the political opposition to mobilize to the street. A counter-demonstration was launched by government loyalists within the premises of the presidential residence that resulted to violent clashes and the death of several people. This became the tipping point and with the maneuverings of a coup coalition composed of civil society leaders, opposition politicians, and military officials, Chávez was unconstitutionally removed from the presidency in 2002 (Encarnación, 2002). While coups in the past have failed, they set a significant precedent, that rebellion and disobedience to the military chain of command is possible and could be successful given a massive mobilization of civil society groups.

The supposed happy ending for the coup coalition did not materialize as blunders of newly sworn president Pedro Carmona as well as actions by other segments

of the military led to the reinstatement of Chávez within 47 hours after he was ousted. In addition, the “autocratic” measures planned by the interim government and the revelation that the coverage of the protests by the media was incorrect tilted public opinion in support of the ousted chief executive. For Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas (2010), the 2002 failed coup against Chávez represented the wide array of possible forms of military intervention that were made feasible because of a precedent – the failed coups in 1992 and 1993. Chávez ordered the repression of the demonstrations but the military leadership did not follow this command. However, the coup coalition soon imploded as traditional politicians marginalized some civil society organizations and the military in the transition government. This caused the military to rebel and spearhead efforts to return Chávez to his rightful place by invoking the constitution and stating that he remains to be the legitimate president of the country and in response to the pressures from international actors such as the Organization of American States (McCoy, 2006). For analysts, what started as a rebellion of a faction of the military ironically ended with a military intervention to defend the democratic constitutional order (Encarnación, 2002; Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas, 2010).

Thaksin and the Royalist Coup in Thailand (2006)

While attending the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meeting in September 2006, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted through a coup launched by the leadership of the Royal Thai Army. It has been fifteen years since the last coup took place in a country famous for short-lived governments, constitutions being quickly rewritten, and acts of military intervention with the blessing of the monarchy. While the “good” coup was hardly a surprise since rumors have been floating since the beginning of that year, it was implemented against a political leader who not only commanded popular support but whose party had overwhelmingly won the parliamentary elections in 2005. According to the coup instigators, the rationale for the coup against Thaksin was to protect the nation and the state from further political chaos. This instability was caused by the mobilization of civil society organizations in light of corruption allegations against Thaksin. While his ouster was in direct violation of the 1997 Constitution and considered by many as a rollback in the country’s democratization process, the military junta (calling themselves the Council of National Security) promised to return to democratic rule by holding elections within a brief period of time (Connors and Hewison, 2008; Pongsudhirak, 2008).

Thaksin is the first prime minister to be reelected and his party, the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party getting the largest percentage of electoral votes in the country’s political history. This was made possible because of the economic recovery that Thailand has experienced from the 1997 Asian financial crisis. But at the same time, he has carved and nurtured political bailiwicks in the north, northeastern, and central parts of the country through “populist” measures that did not bode well with the members of the capitalist bloc and the Bangkok middle class. Pongpaichit and Baker (2008) argued

that Thaksin was not originally a populist politician but embraced principled associated with this ideology when he was accused of corruption by members of the Thai political elite and criticized by the media. From a government committed to bureaucratic reform and capitalist modernization, he focused on anti-poverty programs such as universal health care, agrarian debt relief, and village funds. Like Estrada and Chávez, Thaksin communicated his message directly to the masses by launching his own weekly media program on radio. The rhetoric which resembled that of the neo-populists of Latin America (Weyland, 2001) intensified as soon as middle class support waned. It is this shift in Thaksin's political stance that compelled what McCargo (2005) called the "network monarchy" to mobilize and protect and defend Thai political institutions. The last straw came in the form of a corruption scandal involving the sale suspicious sale of Thaksin's Shin Corporation (Ockey 2008).

Given that Thailand has a parliamentary system, there is an exit option for governments that are perceived to have lost its mandate to govern. Elections are more flexible and could serve as vertical accountability mechanisms to replace political leaders. However, this was not possible since TRT has control of the parliament at any call for new elections will likely deliver a majority vote for the party. The opposition did not have the numbers to successfully cast a vote of no-confidence against the Thaksin government. On the contrary, the mass following of Thaksin in vote-rich parts of the country made elections a futile mechanism of replacing the incumbent prime minister and his cabinet.

The resort became street protests and the massive mobilization of civil society. Calling themselves the People's Alliance for Democracy, this anti-Thaksin movement was a broad alliance of "heterogenous groups" composed of "elite factions, grassroots organizations, social movements, and nongovernmental organizations" (Pye and Schaffar, 2008 p.39). While some may attribute it as a middle-class uprising against the mainly pro-poor mass following of Thaksin, other analysts believed that the contradictions from Thaksin's policies have unified these groups behind a common cause. Such a massive mobilization was not seen since the 1992 May Event where people marched to the streets to protest against a military coup. Protests and street demonstrations mostly in Bangkok have regularly been conducted since the beginning of 2006 (Winichakul, 2008).

There were so signs that the protest cycle will wane and in the meantime, pro-Thaksin supporters from the rural areas are also gathering their strength. Fears of a violent showdown between these groups led the military to launch a coup on September 19, 2006 while Thaksin was in New York City to speak before the UNGA. The military rationalized the coup to prevent further social polarization that they attributed to Thaksin. For Pathmanand (2008), the military intervention was of a different character as during 1991 for it was a coup implemented in defense of the monarchy. Civil society

and the military perceived that Thaksin is attempting to challenge the existing power hierarchy in Thailand by cultivating its own bases of support from the popular sector. Finally, the military also was sensitive about the conditions that surround their implementation of the coup and the different political context of the country from that of 1991. To a great extent, they learned that support from the populace is critical for any military intervention aside from the conventional blessing of the monarchy as seen in the salient role played by the head of the Privy Council. In addition, the military junta that took over the government made a promise that they will surrender power to a democratic government as soon as possible. This sensitivity to the urgency of returning to democratic rule is novel but the extra-constitutional removal of an elected government “closed the most promising an unprecedented chapter of constitutionalism in the history of Thailand” (Pongsudhirak, 2008 p.142).

Comparative Analysis

The three cases have demonstrated that civil society coup as a process of removing an elected chief executive unfolds because of a set of conditions. They are considered critical events in their ongoing democratization process. Estrada, Thaksin, and Chávez were brought to power by the limitations posed by their respective democratic regimes making their populist and anti-status quo leanings particularly appealing to the electorate. Governments have not made great strides in improving the quality of their democratic regime as the state remain dominated by old oligarchs, elites, or parties who resist sharing power to outsiders and avoiding public accountability. As democratization expanded the rights of citizens to participate in politics and express their demands or preferences, whether through the ballot or through the streets, the electoral victory of these three leaders represent the disenchantment of the larger public to their countries’ version of democratic politics. The clamor for change stems from the inability of regime to fulfill its promises of economic development, good governance, and social justice which were all promised at the height for their democratic transitions.

Table 2: Comparative Matrix of the Three Cases⁷

	Philippines	Venezuela	Thailand
Beleaguered Executive	Joseph Estrada	Hugo Chávez	Thaksin Shinawatra
Year Removed	2001	2002	2006
Percentage of Votes Garnered	39.86% (1998)	56.20% (1998)	40.6% (2001) [Thai Rak Thai Party]
Performance Ratings (Range)⁸	+60 (September 1998) +9 (December 2000)	+91% (February 1999) +34% (February 2002)	+80 (2001) +53 (January 2006)
Issues	Corruption Cronyism	Abuse of Power	Corruption Human Rights Abuses

Failed/Absent Accountability Mechanism	Aborted Impeachment	Dissolved Congress	Reelection of Thaksin's party Legislative "shield" (parliamentary majority)
Composition of the Civil Society Front	NGOs, Church, Business Organizations	Trade Unions, Business Organizations, NGOs	NGOs, Students, Business Organizations
Past Mobilizations	1986 EDSA Revolution	1989 Caracazo	1992 May Event
Form of Military Intervention	Military Leadership's Withdrawal of Allegiance	Military Rebellion	Military takeover of government

Table 2 summarizes some patterns evident in the three cases. The incumbents all enjoyed a sizeable electoral mandate mostly from lower socioeconomic classes of society. They also did not come from existing parties with long histories but fledgling ones that they founded. To a great extent, their electoral victory challenged existing arrangements between factions of the political class as they were also viewed as "outsiders" in the normal circulation among the elites. This reveals an important insight in their unfolding democratization process. Election have empowered the citizens to express voice and transfer their loyalties to candidates who campaigned on alleviating poverty, redistributing economic and social power, and dismantling a system that only privileged the existing political elite.

These patterns serve as a backdrop to the three necessary causal conditions that made civil society coups possible in the three countries. First, as these incumbents started to undermine the existing political dispensation, challenges emanating from the political opposition and civil society started to surface. Their policies were interpreted as undermining institutions, repressing political dissent, and curtailing political freedoms. All of these had the collective impact of increasing political polarization. While opposition was always willing and able to antagonize the incumbents, it is their direct association with political scandal (Pérez-Liñán, 2007), whether through corruption or the abuse of power that started the popular outrage and the mobilization of civil society organizations in the three countries. With the help of media, exposure of scandals and reportage of abusive exercises of power have framed the issues launched against Estrada, Chávez, and Thaksin. Suddenly, there was a severe dip in the incumbents' approval or performance ratings based on public opinion surveys. In a brief period of time, the seeming mantle of invulnerability the ballot bestowed were removed thereby exposing them societal-based and institutionally driven challenges from the opposition, legislature, and the courts.

Another common pattern is the presence of mobilizing structures that were first manifested during previous critical episodes in the democratization process of the three countries. Theories of contentious politics (Tarrow, 2011) believed that the mobilization potential of social movements and other groups rest upon existing structures that could be conveniently revived and whose existing repertoires of contentions are readily accessible. To a great extent, collective outrage was easily channeled and expressed through forms of contentious collective action – nonviolent demonstrations in the Philippines, general strikes in Venezuela, and protest marches and occupations in Thailand modeled from past experience. Civil society leaders have drawn on resources, frames, and strategies from previous episodes of contention.

While not all anti-government protests have resulted in the removal of political executives, civil society was in a unique position to pursue two paths. The first is the activation of accountability mechanisms if available (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). This was manifested in the Philippine (through impeachment) and the Thai (elections) cases but in Venezuela, Chávez had already closed the door to that option for civil society. The erosion of accountability already existed in Venezuela before civil society mobilized in the streets while the institutions mandated to perform this function failed to deliver in the two other countries. Nevertheless, the second causal condition, the failure of institutional mechanisms of accountability, was very palpable in the three cases. Only when this door was closed were leaders from civil society emboldened to pursue other options. This revolved around getting out of the constitutional framework and relying on alliances with other political actors to forcibly remove the incumbent in power.

Finally, all countries had a legacy of military intervention in politics albeit at different contexts. Thailand is a perfect case as the military has constantly removed corrupt and ineffective governments since the advent of its constitutional monarchy in 1932. The Philippines did not have a successful military coup in its history although it had experienced several attempts after its democratic transition in 1986. Venezuela's last successful coup was before the advent of the Punto Fijo Republic though it also had failed coups in 1992 and 1993. These two countries illustrate the fact that it is not necessary for a coup to be successful to be able to influence future military intervention as what statistical studies may have argued (Belkin and Schofer, 2003). While the particular form of military intervention varied in type and degree, all three cases showed that the past weighed heavily on whether the military would intervene in the crisis. A successful coup does not necessarily set a precedent but it is the perception shared by the “coup coalition” led by civil society that the military could settle a political crisis by removing the beleaguered executive that is critical in all three cases.

In all instances of civil society coups, various organizations mobilized in the streets that helped create political instability and the loss of the incumbent's political

legitimacy. In the language of contentious politics, civil societies in the three countries had existing mobilizing structures – networks, strategies, resources, and repertoires of contention (Tarrow 2011). The leaders, social movements, and collective groups which mobilized in the 1986 People Power I revolt in the Philippines, the 1992 revolt in Thailand, and the 1989 *Caracazo* in Venezuela were the same usual suspects that were present in the anti-government protests demanding for the resignation and ouster of anti-system leaders.

Conclusion

The presence of these three necessary conditions comprises the causal recipe of a civil society coup. As a peculiar event in the democratization of the three countries, civil society groups have successfully conjured a political crisis and prematurely removed democratically-elected leaders. The strong electoral mandate and popular support of Estrada, Chávez, and Thaksin did not prevent the mobilization of civil society in alliance with their political opponents to create a political impasse that could not be solved by existing democratic institutions and accountability mechanisms. These historical ruptures display the contradictions inherent in the liberal democratic model captured by O'Donnell's concept of delegative democracy. The conflict between competing principles of democracy with the political incumbent invoking majority rule and the primacy of the ballots and civil society representing demands for political accountability, good governance, and the rule of law. As institutions are unable to settle the impasse between the pressures from the streets and the scandals associated with beleaguered executives, extraconstitutional ways of leadership succession became attractive under the guise of defending democracy.

This article is a first stab to studying the conditions surrounding one category of the outcomes when constitutional crises occur in democratic regimes. Looking at three cases with a significant degree of variation in a host of other factors at the country or regional level, it was able to isolate the impact of three conditions – the rise of anti-systemic leadership, the failure of accountability political institutions, and a legacy of past military intervention in politics – where all seen in the Philippines in 2001, Venezuela in 2002, and Thailand in 2006. However, it remains to be seen whether these three conditions are robust enough given that there are different other cases where executives have either been challenged or removed. For example, the theoretical logic of this article could be further validated if future research will look at these cases. As stated, a civil society coup is only one of the many outcomes of societal protest or mobilization and proving that these three conditions were not necessary in these instances will significantly increase inferential leverage.

A related and equally important question relates to the consequences of civil society coups for democratization. This requires more information on how the subsequent events each coup in the three countries. Scholarly consensus remains

inconclusive (Hochstetler and Samuels, 2011; Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010) on whether these coups are a boon or bane for democratization. Future research focusing on the repercussions of civil society coups on both democratic survival and specific aspects of democratic quality such as accountability, civil-military relations, and institution building could be likewise pursued. At the surface, civil society coups exposed the tragedy often associated with this form of political change. While they may empower some individuals and groups to change the history of their democracy, it also exposes the uncertainties associated with as their regime becomes susceptible to further polarization, new tutelary powers and political autonomy for the military, and continued deterioration of democratic institutions. The governments that replaced Estrada and Thaksin as well as the continued rule of Chávez in Venezuela seem to manifest some of these unintended consequences.

Finally, further research on other cases of civil society coups in countries like Guatemala (1993), Ecuador (1997; 2000) and Honduras (2009) is appropriate to confirm the causal conditions theorized in this article. This expansion could also reveal potentially omitted variables or conditions not present in the three cases.

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¹Chávez was ultimately reinstated as president a few days after the coup due to a large part by a faction of the military as well as the intervention of the Organization of American States (OAS).

²Bermeo also used a more inclusive, minimal and therefore more flexible definition of civil society as the networks of formal and informal associations that mediate between individual actors and the state (2003 p.7).

³Such a definition might even accommodate business associations (chambers of commerce) and trade unions.

⁴This section draws heavily from Arugay (2004, 2005).

⁵Estrada has been branded as a drunkard, gambler, and womanizer.

⁶This was the maneuver of Estrada's lawyers to suppress evidence that could incriminate Estrada. The ruling of the Supreme Court Justice (who acts as the presiding officer during the trial) to deny the motion of the defense was overturned by a vote of the senator-jurors. Analysts believed that this vote is a reflection of how they will likely vote on the case itself (Arugay 2005).

⁷Approval ratings for Thaksin's government were taken from newspaper articles of *The Nation*.