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The Capitol Invasion Was a Coup From Below

Trump borrowed from the playbook of his favorite dictator, Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, by inciting a mob to launch an insurrection.

BY [AMY AUSTIN HOLMES](#)

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Supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump at the Capitol in Washington on Jan. 6. ALEX EDELMAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Military coups were once considered things that happened in faraway places where strongmen had not conceded to civilian rule. But not anymore. A lively debate about coups has now kicked off in mainstream American discourse.

The words being bandied about are either borrowed from the French (*coup d'état*), Spanish (*golpe*) or, less frequently, German (*Militärputsch*). Until now the debate has revolved around a simple question. Was the assault on Capitol Hill a coup attempt?

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Here in *Foreign Policy*, Paul Musgrave argued that it was a "[coup attempt](#)," while Naunihal Singh maintained that, however disturbing the events may have been, they did [not fit the definition of a coup](#).

But framing the debate as yes-or-no question limits our ability to understand what happened. When new or unprecedented events occur, analysts need a new vocabulary to discuss them.

The assault on Capitol Hill is best understood as a specific type of coup attempt—one that I call a "coup from below"—in which civilians are the ones who plot, instigate, and mobilize.

In a conventional military coup, members of the armed forces either act alone, or in some cases are aided and abetted by civilians. But in coups from below, these power dynamics are reversed: civilians take on the role of protagonists, while the military is relegated to a secondary role. These dynamics may change, if military or security officials later gain the upper hand, as they often do.

I lived through a coup in Egypt in 2013 that even experts failed to recognize as such. In my book [Coups and Revolutions](#), I argue that we need to change the way policymakers and academics think about coups—and how we respond to them.

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