

## Policy 360 Episode 135 – The Termite Coup

Judith Kelley:

The morning of January 6th, 2021 was already shaping up to be far more eventful, than usual. It was time to certify November's election results, an action that's so uninteresting, it often doesn't receive news coverage at all. But in 2021, president Trump made allegations of election fraud; allegations, without any proof. And he made repeated calls for vice president, Mike Pence to reject the election results.

TV Newscaster 1:

...to believe it can't happen here. But today a deep siege of the US capital by rioters incited by President Trump...

TV Newscaster 2:

...the breach abruptly halting a joint session of Congress, just as Republicans launched a last ditch effort to overturn president-elect Biden's victory of the electoral college....

Judith Kelley:

Perhaps no one watching knew just how significant January 6th would turn out to be.

TV Broadcaster 3:

It is quite clear the authorities did not understand fully the intention of these protestors.

TV Broadcaster 4:

They were trying to figure out what's happening on the Senate floor.

TV Broadcaster 5:

,,, Breach. One after another ....

Judith Kelley:

Across the Atlantic, Stephen Buckley watched from his home in Nairobi as images from the United States capital rolled in. Stephen is an American journalist, but he'd been living in Nairobi for six years as a journalism teacher and editor. Two decades earlier, he'd worked as a foreign correspondent covering a coup in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which was in Zaire led by a revolutionary named Laurent Kabila.

TV Broadcaster 6:

Wednesday, 14th of May rebellion enters the city first in disembodied form. It comes in the shape of hearsay and rumor and rising ...

Judith Kelley:

Stephen Buckley moved back to the U.S., and he's become a professor of journalism here at the Sanford school. And he's written about parallels between January 6th and coups like the one in Zaire for The Atlantic. His article is called the Termite Coup. Stephen, welcome to Policy 360.

Stephen:

## Policy 360 Episode 135 – The Termite Coup

Thank you Judith. Great to be here.

Judith Kelley:

The termite coup what does that mean?

Stephen:

Well most coups are more akin to lightning than, than the work of termites in that coups tend to happen relatively quickly. The rebels or the revolutionaries take over the capital, they grab control of the airport, they take over the TV stations and radio stations, et cetera. And it is not unusual in a coup to wake up with a government in place one morning, and then the next morning, an entirely new leader is in place. Termite coup is very different in that what we're seeing in the states is this gradual inside out coup where the people who want to usurp legitimate authority are doing it with a combination both of sort of bare knuckled, extra legal tactics, as well as trying to get elected, not necessarily so that they can govern better, but simply so that they can overturn legitimately elected officials. And that's what makes what's happening so insidious and so hard to appreciate the urgency of what's happening.

Judith Kelley:

Is coup though the right term then if it's so different?

Stephen:

You know, that's a terrific question. And, I can see both sides of that. I mean, there are people who would argue that if you are, trying to change things by putting people who agree with you in office well that's not a coup. They may be correct in the most technical sense, but what's alarming to me is that first of all, they're using a process that they themselves have labeled as corrupt and evil, but secondly, the folks who are trying to say that Joe Biden or the democratic party stole the November 2020 election, those people are wanting to put candidates in place, again simply because they want to de-legitimize the work that voters did in November of 2020. So they're using the process, but the process is being used to hollow out a legitimate process. That's what's so striking to me.

Judith Kelley:

But if you go out and ask the folks that were involved and even folks that chose not to be involved, but nevertheless were supportive. There are many, many people, who believed that the election had been stolen. And, and if they were citizen who believed the election had been stolen and they decide to speak up, take action. How does that fit in your narrative when you frame it that way?

Stephen:

So someone famously said, we're all entitled to our own opinions, we are not entitled to our own facts. And I think the challenge we face is that the people who are saying, well, we need a whole new set of leaders and November 20th was not a legitimate election, are defying the facts. And the problem is that no matter what they say, they can't change the reality that 81 million people voted for Joe Biden and 74 million people voted for Donald Trump. More than 60 lawsuits have been filed over this election. All of them have come down on the side of the election's legitimacy, and so while this group of folks who don't believe in the legitimacy of the election can continue to say that, yeah, no, the election was stolen. That doesn't mean it's true. And I think it's important to keep coming back to that, because this isn't just about a group of people leveraging the process to change things, they're leveraging the process, but the platform they're using is based on an untruth, based on a lie.

## Policy 360 Episode 135 – The Termite Coup

Judith Kelley:

So here you are, sitting watching this in Nairobi. As you're watching this, what is it that you are seeing that is giving you flashbacks?

Stephen:

I was seeing people roaming the halls of the capital. In one case somebody was sitting in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's chair.

Judith Kelley:

Right? That's certainly a classical picture we see right? The fall of such-and-such government rebel sitting in chair.

Stephen:

Precisely. There were people flying Trump flags, which again, is a common image. There were folks defacing the halls of Congress. And, that's also pretty typical for rebels or revolutionaries when they in the midst of a coup.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. Were there things, so, there are the actual folks who are in the capital and, obviously they are one part of the picture, but in some ways, one might even argue that they are, I wouldn't say an incidental part, but they are, they're certainly part of something that is bigger than themselves for some of them they claim. And, and some of them probably is true that they more or less sort of got swept up and wandered in. And, and so there was other stuff going on though, that was more larger scale or macro perspective, people who were not simply, you know, your average citizen, the processes and things that were going on.

Stephen:

So I think it's really important to put January 6th in the context of what was happening before that date, and what's happened after that date. I still, if you just isolate what happened, particularly in terms of the violence on January 6th, I don't know if that in and of itself qualifies as a coup now, as an attempted coup. Now the fact that you have the President of the United States pressuring the Vice President to de-certify election results in many ways, that's actually more coup like than the, than the violence it itself. And so to, to come back around to where we started with regard to the term termite coup it's a termite coup because this is the steady drumbeat, this chipping away at the results of November 2020. So I just think it's, I know, and I really do appreciate and understand the reasons why we focus so heavily on January 6th, but what's happening in America right now is so much bigger than January 6th.

Judith Kelley:

So if you think back again to Sub-Saharan Africa and, and Laurent Kabila, you know, I think a lot of people would say these are just not comparable and that, that could just never happen here. What do you say to that?

Stephen:

I used to think that way, until I saw those images, as I sat at the edge of my bed in Nairobi. So I remember turning to my wife and saying to her, if I didn't know that this, that these events were

## Policy 360 Episode 135 – The Termite Coup

unfolding in my home country, the United States, I would think, oh, this is happening in some other country. And I just, I think it is arrogant, fool hearty, naive to think that, our democracy is so robust that we can withstand steady anti-democracy actions that we've experienced over the last well, since November 2020.

Judith Kelley:

I mean, you might say arrogant and all those kinds of things, but we also know as scholars that we're just prone to confirmation bias. We see what, what we want to see. We, we make the evidence point, you know, we're like, okay, Omicron is going to beat this COVID thing. It's this is it. This is, you know, and the epidemiologists are saying, yeah, that could be another variant that comes out. We're like, no, no, no, this is, this is it, you know? And so is not necessarily maybe that so much arrogance is just, that's how our brains work. Right. It's the kind of bias we have.

Stephen:

Yeah. You know, there are, there are any number of reasons why, I mean, look, the, the power of patriotism, which is not necessarily arrogance, or naivete. It's just, I love my country and I can't necessarily picture what happened in the former Zaire happening in the United States. And I would be quick to point out that some of it is, wait a minute, that's Africa, maybe you, you get coups happening there, but, but that's not going to happen most likely in the United States.

Judith Kelley:

So one thing you ask about in the article is that, you know, if we're so angry, why aren't people in the streets and, and that got me thinking about this notion of a termite coup regardless of whether we like the term coup or not, certainly there have been lots of folks in the last, since in the last year, as a matter of fact, we have been writing about the constitutional crisis and the potential for that this is much bigger than we're making it out to be. And, and that, you know, we are, we are headed to a, a deep crisis for the country. But the interesting question you will ask here is if that is so, why is there only a sort of vocal minority that is writing fancy articles about this and doing podcasts about it? Why are people not out in the streets? And is there something about, is there something in your termite analogy that actually helps us understand this, a tree can fall on your house and it's going to crush your roof and do all these kinds of things, and you're going to have to get out of bed and do something about it. Right? But if you've got termites, you might let that go on way beyond what you should. So, yeah. Talk to me a little bit more about that.

Stephen:

No, that's that, that's exactly, that's exactly right. And we sometimes don't realize the extent of the termite damage until it's too late. And I think particularly moderates can fall into that trap where we just think, you know, it's just what you, when you look at life in America on a day to day basis, life, life is going on. I mean, yes, we are in the midst of a pandemic, but the truth of the matter is that on a day-to-day basis, many of us are trying to live our, our daily life as, as best as possible. And so my great fear is, that as is often the case with, with termite damage, you wake up and you realize, oh my gosh, the termites have infested most of the house or whatever the case may be. And the damage is so great that it's irreversible.

Judith Kelley:

## Policy 360 Episode 135 – The Termite Coup

So do you think that, you know, I'm thinking about my own, my own past. I used to live in, in China in the late eighties. And so I lived for two years there in a society that was incredibly authoritarian, a surveillance society. And, to me, coming from a country like Denmark at that time, you know, it was just, it was almost surreal when you went from Hong Kong into China and was like, you had entered to another, another state, of being, another atmosphere, another, you know, planet for lack of a better analogy. And it was, it was so parallel universe. And, and is there something about how we think about us as a America, the west as educated societies where we, where we are thinking, okay, those people in Zaire, those people in communist China, you know, they don't, they don't know as much as we know, they're not as educated. They haven't tasted freedom. And so therefore we are more, this, this, this, the reason it won't happen to us is because we are just more, we're more sophisticated about it.

Stephen:

Yeah. I think we think that we're more sophisticated, you know, coups are not really about sophistication. They're, they're ultimately about power. And the truth is that what, at least from my perspective, that's what we're seeing now is that we're seeing not necessarily a struggle for what's more effective policy. We're seeing a struggle over, who's going to dominate. Who's going to be in control, power, at least as I perceive it power for the sake of power. And any time any society starts to think that way, that's the, that's a, a red flag. We think we are special. We think we are different. And I say, we, because like you, I'm an immigrant. And so to some extent, I wouldn't be an American citizen today if I myself had bought into this notion of American exceptionalism to some extent. But I do think the downside of exceptionalism is this deception. And I think it's, I do think it's a deception

Judith Kelley:

Or blind spot.

Stephen:

Blind spot sure we think, because we are so different, some things simply cannot happen to us.

Judith Kelley:

When I think about coups or, you know, overthrows, violent overthrow and things in other countries, it often is a, a violent, abrupt mechanism, et cetera, that has come about because of a, a state failure to govern often a state's failure to provide basic necessities, et cetera, et cetera. In our case where we find ourselves today is less of a result of economic deprivation or any of these things. And more result of our systems of governance, our two party system, our electoral college, the way we decentralize elections, the many things in society that are facilitating polarization, including misinformation, et cetera, et cetera, it is our system that has gradually pushed that in, pushed us into, we have painted ourselves into two, two separate corners.

Stephen:

Yes. I, I think that's true. I think that's absolutely right. And, I do think that we have had some longstanding quiet crises that we have, we have ignored for a long time. Stagnant wages, healthcare that for many people, even with the, even with the Affordable Care Act, there are many people who cannot afford to ever be sick. There are, there are many, many, many Americans who are living from paycheck to paycheck. We have, we continue to have a very serious crisis around police brutality and law enforcement in general, mass incarceration. There are a whole list of crises. I said, quiet crises. Some of them are not so quiet that we've, that we, we haven't dealt with as a society. And so, and so I do

## Policy 360 Episode 135 – The Termite Coup

think that what you said combined with some of these other very real issues have led to this spirit of pessimism and despair that has been very, very striking since I returned from Nairobi. And I think one characteristic of virtually all coups is that they spring out of despair, that the folks who commit the coup are representing a group of people who feel like there's no, there's no hope. And, and increasingly I sense that there is a pro an increasingly powerful sense of despair or hopelessness, which is, which is very jolting.

Judith Kelley:

Which of course, I mean, it's further exacerbated by other problems that we face globally outside even of the United States. Right. So certainly, certainly trying times, but I, but I am wondering, you know, if you look at other coups and if you're trying to say, okay, is there anything we can learn from them in the United States? I wonder if the parallels just break down because the nature of the underlying causes and the method; i.e., the termite methods versus the tree that crashes, are just so different that we don't really have a lot of, of places to look or, or do you see any kind of, any kind of experience from other countries that you've observed as a journalist where we, we can gain any kind of insights?

Stephen:

No. And, and I can't think of parallels. I suspect there, there may be some, but I can't think of any. And, and I do think that that's one of the reasons why it is, you know, you asked, you asked about why aren't people in the streets?

Judith Kelley:

You asked that in your article. Yeah.

Stephen:

Yeah. I do think if you've never seen something like this before, if you've never, if there's no model necessarily you can't point to another country and say, you know what? I remember reading about something like this. And so I do think that our collective challenge is that because there aren't any models when it comes to kind of a slow moving coup it's hard to know how to react.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Stephen:

And know what to do.

Judith Kelley:

So did you bring your crystal ball?

Stephen:

Did I bring my crystal ball?

Judith Kelley:

Yeah, do you have it there?

## Policy 360 Episode 135 – The Termite Coup

Stephen:

No, I forgot it at home today.

Judith Kelley:

Geez

Stephen:

Did you bring yours?

Judith Kelley:

Of course.

Stephen:

Well, what do you think is going to happen?

Judith Kelley:

Well, I knew, see, my crystal ball told me you had not brought your crystal ball. I knew it. But do, do you think that the, the rhetoric of, of broader rhetoric of sort of mistrust around the election cycle, you think it's going to be per, you know, perpetuated you think we'll, we'll still be dealing with the legacy of this termite coup what do you think it will be? And will we be talking about this four years from now 10 years from now?

Stephen:

I do, because I do, I think that what's happening is some of the, some of what we're seeing is the erosion of what I think historically we've thought of as some fundamental democratic habits. The fact that, that you have this ongoing challenge to legitimate presidential election, it will be hard four years or 10 years from now to not feel the reverberations of that.

Judith Kelley:

Do you think it'll continue to feel like a partisan issue, or do you think that, that it will become more of a dispersed set OF perceptions by different groups who are able to take steps back regardless of where they sit ideologically?

Stephen:

I don't, the wounds of these months, I think they will always ripple across our democracy in the same way that the civil war does today. And that's tragic, you know, what do we, what do we do about that?

Judith Kelley:

We have to, we have to at least be willing to get to a point where we can acknowledge that there is some mutual culpability, because as long as it keeps feeling like it's one side pointing at the other side, then it doesn't seem like there's any room for bridge building, you know? And it's not just a matter of saying, okay, we got to reach your hand across the aisle and start working with the other side. But when I use the word culpability, I use that word because I think there has to be some room for internal

## Policy 360 Episode 135 – The Termite Coup

reflection of how in any way, shape or form each side might have gotten us to where we're at. Right? So on that happy note, thank you so much for joining me today, Stephen.

Stephen:

Well, thanks for having me, you know, wonderfully stimulating conversation.

Judith Kelley:

Steven Buckley is Eugene C. Patterson Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy here at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, where he is affiliated with the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy. And if you like this episode, you might be interested in episode 131 where we explore redistricting and American democracy. And that episode includes audio highlights from a recent conference we had here at Duke, or you could turn to episode 123, where we look at research into how to make our social media platforms less politically polarizing with the director of Duke University's polarization lab. And here's a hint. The answer is not to get out of our own bubbles. Thanks for joining me. I'll be back in two weeks with another conversation, I'm Judith Kelley.