

## **Trump will likely launch an armed coup in 2026<sup>1</sup>**

We assess that President Trump and several Cabinet Secretaries are highly likely to attempt a violent coup d'état in the several months before October 2026. A coup attempt by the White House becomes less likely, but would remain a credible risk, if Vice President Vance has replaced Trump before then as President through the latter's death, resignation or removal from office.

Trump and key advisers are coming to believe that such extreme action may be needed to prevent the Democratic Party from winning control of the Congress in the mid-term elections scheduled for 3 November 2026. If the Democrats win both houses, or even just the House of Representatives, Trump would likely be impeached for his criminal activity and the frequent and egregious overstepping of his Presidential authority. A Democrat majority in the House of Representatives in the mid-terms would seriously undermine the Trump Presidency and ultimately expose him and many of his allies to investigation for serious crimes by the committees of Congress and various state prosecutors.

Trump and his advisers are also coming to the view that a violent seizure of power will be the only way to neutralise the mounting resistance by governors, legislators and judges in the 23 Democratic-led states and by Democrats in the US Congress. Historical precedents of a president-led coup (or similar) involving dissolution of a parliament include Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, and Boris Yeltsin. A 2022 study published in a Cambridge University journal study of such "self-coups" assess that 70% have been successful, though it notes that Trump's first attempt on January 6 2021 failed. It also notes that such attempts are more likely to be successful if they are backed by the armed forces and occur in a pre-established authoritarian setting.

### **Legitimation Triggers for the coup**

Trump would rely heavily for the legitimacy of his coup on an appeal for emergency action by Republican-led states and the Republican-led Congress citing grave election cheating, spikes in violent crime, and escalating protest violence by anti-Trump forces across the country. He would likely arrest some leading political opponents and at least one of the liberal members of the US Supreme Court and other liberal judges in the most powerful states (California, New York and Illinois) and in Washington DC.

### **Indicators of an imminent coup**

There are powerful indicators that Trump will attempt such a coup.

The strongest evidence is that Trump has attempted a similar gambit before. Evidence in the public domain, including from former Vice President Pence, supports the view

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<sup>1</sup> This document has been drafted by the privately operated Centre for National Security Ethics. The document has no official standing on behalf of any government.

that Trump on 6 January 2021 tried to use force and other illegal means to prevent the declaration of the results of the 2020 President election that he lost to President-elect Biden.

Since that time, Trump has continued to try to legitimise the insurrection of 6 January (J6) at the US Capitol which he provoked. His pardon of around 1500 convicted J6 insurrectionists on his first day in office was a major escalation of that legitimisation. The decision by his Administration in late August 2025 to award the family of the insurrectionist killed on 6 January, Ashli Babbitt, the right to full military funeral honours represents an escalation of his legitimisation efforts.

Trump's willingness to ignore and subvert the Constitution has been emboldened by the US Supreme Court's decision of 14 July 2024 in favour of Trumps' view on Presidential immunity. The Court held that the President had "absolute immunity from criminal prosecution for actions" within his constitutional authority and "at least presumptive immunity from prosecution for all his official acts".

He has also been emboldened by the resultant and the subsequent collapse of the criminal cases against him for unlawful and egregious mishandling of top secret documents and for his role in conspiring to incite the 6 January insurrection.

Since becoming President, Trump has repeatedly denied the legitimacy of the US Constitution. His allies are calling for a Constitutional Convention to shift power to the Presidency. Article V of the Constitution requires Congress to hold such a convention if two-thirds of state legislatures (34 states) call for one. Trump allies are already manipulating in Trump's favour the political meaning of "calling" for a convention.

Trump is developing a domestic militia on a grand scale to support whatever unlawful actions he might take. This militia will be based primarily on the pre-existing agency, Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE). Planned expansions of ICE under Trump have been dramatic, with provision to increase the force of roughly 6,500 deportation officers by 10,000 new officers, many in desk and legal roles, by December 2025. Multiple eyewitness accounts from 2024–2025 report that ICE agents have appeared at raids with automatic rifles and other high-powered weapons especially during mass enforcement actions or more volatile protests.

The Administration justifies the expansion of ICE by the need to execute Trump's promise of the "biggest deportation" in American history. But even at these higher levels of funding, annual deportations are unlikely to reach more than several hundred thousand, when the claimed goal is 15 million overall, (based on one million per year). Meanwhile, ICE is building a network of new detention facilities where political opponents of Trump have already been held unlawfully with limited or no public oversight.

Unlawful “disappearances” of US citizens by masked and unidentified persons are increasing in number. This is a repeat of events that occurred under ICE during Black Lives Matter demonstrations and civil unrest in 2020. The levels of violence and abuse of the law by ICE officers in the deportation campaign is another indicator of their potential for involvement in a coup. Unconfirmed reports of active recruitment into ICE of members of extremist groups like the Proud Boys are a source of concern and are credible.

A significant indicator of an impending violent coup in the United States is deployment or threatened deployment of National Guard troops to Democratic states, such as California and Illinois and to the District of Columbia. It is an almost iron-clad rule of political analysis that if a government deploys military units to unusual front-line locations on a large scale, there is a very high probability that they will eventually be ordered to use force or themselves take the decision to do so.

While the deployments to date have not threatened the arrest of leading political opponents of Trump, the decision by the Justice Department to investigate possible criminal charges against some of these is a serious indicator of likely intent to arrest and detain a significant number of them, at least temporarily, as part of the coup.

On 25 August 2025, two weeks after the President ordered National Guard troops into Washington DC for the purported purpose of suppressing a crime spree, he issued an Executive Order purportedly focusing on DC matters to order the establishment of a standing corps of national guards personnel (a “quick reaction force”) from each state to be “resourced, trained, and available for rapid nationwide deployment” to help ensure public safety and order. The President is using legal ambiguities about the function of the National Guard to bring about a shift in public perceptions of its use in support of contested political agendas of the White House. He is also signalling his intent to use the Guard to suppress public dissent.

### **Full or partial coup? Firm Plan or *ad hoc* action?**

The scale and scope of a coup will be shaped largely by political contingencies as the date of the mid-term elections approaches. It is highly unlikely that Trump himself has mapped out a detailed plan. He is absolutely intent on preventing free and fair mid-term elections and will do so by any means available. He is deliberately setting in place many of the foundations for an armed coup involving violent repressions if he judges it necessary. We believe that current political trends will lead him to that conclusion by April 2026 as the primary season to nominate candidates unfolds.

Trump has considerable support for the idea of a coup. A number of anti-government forces and Trump supporters have been actively campaigning and planning for an overthrow of the constitutional order in Washington DC through violence. The Congressional Committee investigating the January 6 violence at the US Capitol found

multiple forms of evidence supporting claims of preparation for and support of an armed insurrection.

In 2023, a federal grand jury indicted Trump for trying to overturn the 2020 presidential election result. In 2024, a Department of Justice filing in the case assessed that Trump “worked with private co-conspirators to undertake a “series of increasingly desperate plans to overturn the legitimate election results in seven states that he had lost.” This term “increasingly desperate” will define Trump’s strategy to launch a coup if he needs to before November 3 2026.

This analysis suggests that the more robust that political opposition to Trump becomes, the more violent and criminal his implementation of a coup will be. The policies of the Trump Administration across the Board have become more draconian from week to week since he started his second term.

The increasingly erratic behaviour of Trump and his visible mental decline through 2025 will likely enhance the ability of his closest advisers to persuade the President to undertake such a coup attempt or claim to be acting in his name.

Most Republican leaders in the US Congress have no commitment to Constitutional order that would see them resist a Trump-led coup. They appear to believe that Trump is the destiny and future of the country. Rightly or wrongly they discount the ability of opposition forces to be able to oppose or quickly reverse further use of force and violence by Trump and his organised supporters. For now, Democrat-led efforts to oppose a coup attempt by Trump appear to centre on public protest, passive resistance and civil disobedience.

### **Could political opponents reverse a coup?**

A coup by a sitting President to illegally overthrow the Constitutional order in the United States would be almost impossible to reverse within a year or two since the office bestows on that person the power to command the armed forces and, in situations of insurrection, command of the National Guard. The President also commands assets of the FBI and CIA which would be highly influential in supporting further usurpation of power by the President. Even if elements of the armed forces were to attempt to physically reverse elements of the coup, such as the mass arrest of political opponents or the cancellation of the mid-term elections, such efforts would likely be highly localised and would not have the necessary national impact. There is little reason to believe the leaders of the armed forces would take such a stand that led to military clashes between different units.

The Courts would not be regarded as a barrier by Trump and coup planners since they already refuse to recognise their authority and anyway the Courts have proven to be very slow moving.

National media have been decisive in many coups in other countries. In current US politics, the mainstream media at the national level have shown themselves to be weak in the face of intimidation efforts by Trump, and this is unlikely to change in the coming six months. The failures of the national mainstream media to take a critical stance on Trump's abuses of power have directly led to a strengthening of online non-traditional sources. The essential aspect of this situation is that the mass media is highly fragmented and severely challenged by narratives emerging from the even more fragmented social media outlets.

For the media to turn national sentiment against a Trump coup there would need to be clear and unified signals to do so from several sources, such as the owners of major information utilities (Meta, Google, Microsoft and Apple) along with owners of several major TV networks. Such a reversal of public sentiment against a coup would not be instantaneous, but would take months or years.

Another powerful asset that Trump commands is the loyalty or sympathy of many local law enforcement officers based on his strong support for immunity of police in cases alleging police abuse and his strong rhetoric on crime. The independent news source, the Public Broadcasting Service, published an assessment in August 2025 that Trump's approach to crime is "now a clear strength for him", as evidenced in a new poll showing that about half of US adults (53%) approve of this approach, "higher than support his handling of immigration, the economy or the Russia-Ukraine war".

1 September 2025