

THE POLITICS OF DICTATORSHIP

Institutions and
Outcomes in
Authoritarian
Regimes

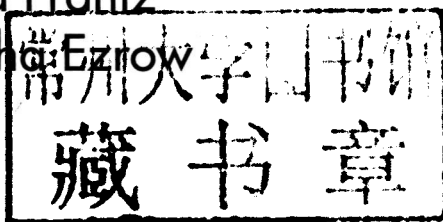
ERICA FRANTZ AND NATASHA EZROW

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Authoritarian Regimes

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Authoritarian Politics in the Modern World

Dictators ride to and fro upon tigers from which they dare not dismount.

—Winston Churchill (“Armistice or Peace?” 1937)

Dictators have dominated the world’s political landscape for hundreds of years, ranging from the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, to the emperors of Rome, to the absolute monarchs of Europe. Indeed, authoritarian government has been the norm for much of history. And dictatorships are by no means a thing of the past. As late as the 1970s, autocracy was more common than democracy. In 2010, about one-third of the world’s countries were governed by dictatorship. The Chinese communist regime alone rules nearly a quarter of the world’s population (Brooker 2000, p. 1). As reported in *The Economist* in 2008: “following a decades-long global trend in democratization, the spread of democracy has come to a halt” (“Democracy Index: Off the March” 2008). Even though dictatorships are so widespread, authoritarian rule remains one of the least-studied areas of political science.¹ In comparison to democratic political systems, we know very little about how dictatorships work, who the key political actors are, and where the locus of decisionmaking rests.

The purpose of this study is to examine how authoritarianism influences political outcomes. In dictatorships, politics centers on an interplay between two key actors: leaders and elites. These actors engage in a constant struggle for power, driven by a desire for political influence. Not only do elites compete with the dictator, but they also compete with one another.² Authoritarian institutions shape the dynamics of this struggle. In particular, how dictatorships are gov-

erned, whether by a professionalized military, a political party, or neither, influences the nature of leader-elite relations and, in turn, how politics works. In this study, we show how these institutional differences affect a wide array of political outcomes, such as how hard it is for elites to oust dictators, the ability of elites to hold dictators accountable for poor policy choices, the quality of information channels that exist between leaders and elites, and the ease with which leaders and elites can reach agreements on significant policy changes.

The Role of Elites

We begin this study by discussing the key role that elites play in authoritarian politics. All political leaders need the support of some citizens in order to maintain their command. In dictatorships, the set of individuals whose support the dictator requires to stay in power is the elite coalition. As Paul Lewis wrote: “Regardless of how powerful dictators are, the complexities of modern society and government make it impossible for them to rule alone. They may dominate their respective systems, but some of their authority must be delegated, which means that a government elite stratum is formed just below them” (1978, p. 622). Elites matter because they control the fates of dictators. Perhaps surprisingly, the vast majority of dictators are toppled via internal coups rather than by popular uprisings (Tullock 1987). In fact, dictators are removed from power most frequently by government insiders (Svolik 2009, p. 478). As King Sesostri of Egypt was rumored to have warned future kings in 1965 B.C.E.: “Be on your guard against all subordinates, because you cannot be sure who is plotting against you” (Rindova and Starbuck 1997, p. 321). The dictator’s elite support group plays a key role in authoritarian politics because the dictator’s tenure is often contingent upon it.³

Examples of elites’ role in the downfall of dictators abound. In Argentina in 1981, the leader of the military dictatorship, Roberto Viola, was overthrown by junta members because they were upset that he had established a dialogue with union leaders and included civilians in the cabinet. Similarly, in Nigeria in 1975, Yakubu Gowon was overthrown by his colleagues because they felt that he was too indecisive and no longer consulted with members of the Supreme Military Council. In Thailand in 1977, Prime Minister Tanin Kraivixien was forced to resign because elites did not like his economic policies (Tamada 1995, p. 321). Ghana provides yet another

example, where in 1978, due to a steady erosion of power, Ignatius Kutu Acheampong was arrested by his chief of staff, Frederick Akuffo, who later replaced him as head of state and leader (“Background Note: Ghana” 2008). As Jean-Bédél Bokassa of the Central African Republic knew well, the greatest danger to his power came not from the opposition, but from his own entourage (Tittley 1997, p. 43). Elites serve as the dictator’s main political rivals and therefore primary source of political insecurity.

The Role of Party and Military Institutions

Whether dictatorships are governed by a political party, a professionalized military, or neither affects the dynamics of leader and elite interactions.⁴ We emphasize party and military organizations because they are institutions that can potentially structure elite politics. Parties and militaries are forms of human organization and resource concentration that make possible the seizure of power. Unlike many other institutions, parties and militaries are largely self-enforcing bargains, because those who belong to them benefit from their membership.

We look at how political outcomes differ across the following types of dictatorship: single-party, military, and personalist.⁵ These categorizations are based on whether access to political office and control over policy are dominated by a hegemonic party, the military as an institution, or a single individual. In single-party regimes, the elite coalition is usually the ruling body of the party, sometimes called the central committee or politburo; in military regimes, the coalition generally consists of the military junta (and often other high-ranked officers); and in personalist regimes, the coalition is typically made up of individuals personally chosen by the ruler. Whether the dictatorship is party-based, military-based, or neither has profound implications for the political outcomes that result, from how easy it is for dictators to survive in office to the freedom dictators have in their foreign and domestic policy choices.

Political Survival in Dictatorships

These different institutions shape the interplay between leaders and elites in their struggle for political influence, a struggle that is driven by the larger goal of political survival. Research on political survival

in modern dictatorial regimes has typically emphasized the various strategies dictators employ to stay in power (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956; Arendt 1951; Tullock 1987).⁶ In Mancur Olson's (2000) conceptualization, for example, dictators come to power as stationary bandits who monopolize and rationalize theft in the form of taxes. The time horizons of dictators influence the extent to which they will provide a peaceful order and other public goods that increase the productivity of their subjects. Olson's story, however, assumes that dictators do not face any threats to their survival once in power. Ronald Wintrobe's (1998) argument emphasizes this point. Dictators are inherently insecure because they never know whether their subjects are their allies or their rivals. Some analysts note that dictators face the constant threat of popular rebellion (see Acemoglu and Robinson 2001; Boix 2003; Sanhueza 1999). To deter this threat, dictators have a variety of tools at their disposal, such as repressing some parts of the population while nurturing the loyalty of others (Wintrobe 1998) and incorporating potential opposition forces in the regime via partisan legislatures (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). This emphasis on the threat of popular uprising, however, is somewhat misguided. Empirically, the primary threat to the leader's tenure is not popular rebellion or revolution. As Malawian personalist dictator Hastings Banda was aware, "danger to [the leader's] rule comes not from any likely popular uprising, but from a 'palace coup' within his own ruling party" (Legum 1975–1976, B268). This is not to say that the threat of revolution does not exist, but rather that dictators are ousted far more frequently by members of their own inner circle than by members of opposition groups.

Various scholars acknowledge this and address explicitly the threats dictators face from within their ruling coalition (Svolik 2009; Gallego and Pitchik 2004; Egorov and Sonin 2006). According to Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and colleagues (2003), for example, there are two key groups that influence leaders' political survival: the selectorate (a subset of the population that has a say in the selection of the leader) and the winning coalition (a subset of the selectorate large enough to maintain a leader in power). The leader's position is the most secure when the selectorate is large and the winning coalition is small. This is partly because the costs of defection can be high in such situations, but also because members of the winning coalition can easily be replaced by members of the selectorate. Though the concepts underlying this theory are useful, the argument is difficult to

evaluate given that in most dictatorships it is not clear who the selectorate is. Which individuals in authoritarian regimes, apart from members of the winning coalition, actually have a say in the selection of dictators? In military dictatorships, for example, elites and leaders typically rely on other members of the military for the regime to last. These low-level members of the military, however, rarely, if ever, have any say in the selection of leaders.⁷

In a different vein, Beatriz Magaloni argues that in order to survive in office, dictators need to establish “power-sharing agreements with their ruling coalitions, which are often not credible” (2008, p. 715). Because there is nothing that prevents dictators from reneging on their commitments to those in their support group, potential rivals have incentives to conspire or rebel. To mitigate this commitment problem, dictators choose to share some of their power with members of their ruling coalition, primarily via the creation of political parties and elections. This argument, however, essentially assumes that dictators inherit structure-free domestic environments upon their assumption to power, and create from scratch any institutional arrangements that emerge. Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski (2007) make a similar assumption. The extent to which such an assumption will be true, though, will depend on how tightly organized the seizure group is that launched the dictator into power. As Stephen Haber writes: “Dictators need an organized group in order to take power. Some of these groups, such as the military, a political party, or a royal family, are formally constituted, have rules governing their internal workings, and may already be part of a pre-existing government. Others, such as a revolutionary movement, a military splinter group, or a federation of warlords are less institutionalized” (2006, p. 6). The more formally constituted the seizure group is, the more likely it is that the regime that forms will share structural characteristics similar to those of the seizure group, and the more difficult it will be for the leader at the helm of the group to mold the structure of the regime in ways that will prolong his political survival (Geddes 2004). In addition, leadership turnover within the same regime is very common (discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). In such scenarios, leaders inherit whatever institutional structures (or lack thereof) that precede them. Dictators may try to alter these structures, but their success in doing so is in no way guaranteed.

This study expands on past work on political survival in dictatorships by emphasizing that (1) elites are the primary threat to the dic-

tator's survival, and (2) domestic institutions shape the severity of the threat they pose.

Regime Formation and Institutional Change

The foundational moments of authoritarian regimes usually have lasting effects on their institutional structures. Whether dictatorships are party-based, military-based, or neither typically results from struggles within the seizure group, often at the time of seizure or during the first few years afterward (Geddes 2004; Haber 2006, p. 21). Once the seizure group takes control, its leader tries to maximize his power and personalize the regime, while the group's members work to resist such efforts (Geddes 2004). The result of this strategic interaction—largely determined by the group's preexisting organizational strength—has profound implications for the makeup of the emergent regime. Put simply, when seizure groups are organizationally strong, members are able to prevent personalization (resulting in military or single-party regimes); when seizure groups are organizationally weak, members are unable to formidably challenge the leader's efforts and the group dissolves or splinters (resulting in personalist regimes). Military dictatorships, for example, are usually the result of seizures of power undertaken by military hierarchies that are more professionalized, having “developed more binding commitments to military norms of unity, obedience, and rule-boundedness than have less professionalized or recently indigenized militaries” (Geddes 2004, p. 22). Similarly, single-party dictatorships are usually the result of seizures of power undertaken by parties that are more professionalized, having “led revolutionary struggles or resistance to foreign occupation than those in less demanding circumstances” (Geddes 2004, p. 22). When seizure groups lack such professionalization, personalist forms of dictatorship tend to emerge.⁸

Leaders' attempts to maximize their power do not stop once regimes are formed, of course. Because all leaders have the same goal—to stay in power for as long as possible (Tullock 1987)—most will try to gain personal control over as many key political instruments as possible throughout their tenures, such as control over assignments to political posts, control over policy, and control over the security forces.⁹ Once established, however, institutional struc-

tures can be hard to change. In East Germany, for example, Walter Ulbricht tried to increase his power through party purges and expulsions. His success, however, was limited by opposition from other members of his party (Granville 2006). This does not mean that institutional structures do not change, but rather that they can develop stickiness over time.¹⁰

The emergence of new organizations in dictatorships does not always reflect a significant change in the institutional structure of the regime, however. This is particularly true with political parties. It is very common for dictatorships to co-opt or create a political party to support the regime (Geddes 2005). Examples include Rafael Trujillo's alliance with the Dominican Party during his personalist reign over the Dominican Republic (1966–1978) and the Brazilian military dictatorship's (1964–1985) creation of the National Renewal Alliance Party (ARENA) in 1966. As many studies have identified (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Gandhi 2008; Brownlee 2008; Geddes 2005), dictatorships create political parties (or ally with existing ones) because support parties contain real benefits for the regime and can help prolong its hold on power. A regime's decision to create or ally with a political party, however, should not be conflated as a transition to party-based rule. That a party is represented in government does not mean that it exercises any independent political power, has a say in leadership selection, or plays a significant role in distributing patronage to supporters (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010, p. 126; Geddes 2003, p. 52), all of which are key characteristics of party-based dictatorship. Though it is typical for regimes to create or ally with political parties as survival tools, such parties are usually kept organizationally weak and dependent on the regime to ensure that they do not develop any real power or autonomy. Their incorporation into the regime should not be seen as fundamentally altering the regime's structure or power base.

Still, authoritarian regimes are nearly always characterized by some level of institutional fluidity. This fluidity is the result of the endless power struggle at play between elites and dictators that we emphasize throughout this study. While it occasionally translates into a fundamental transformation of the institutional structure of the regime (i.e., regime change), it is generally just part of the natural ebb and flow of authoritarian politics. Even amid this institutional fluidity, the central theoretical mechanisms that we identify in this study should still operate.¹¹

Key Themes

Woven throughout our exploration of how the institutional structure of dictatorships influences the nature of the relationship between dictators and their elite supporters and, in turn, influences how politics works, is an emphasis on two key dimensions. These dimensions each affect how power is distributed between leaders and elites. The first is whether elites share membership in a unifying institution (central to Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5). When elites share membership in a unifying institution, like a party or military, it enables them to bargain with the dictator as a collective. This eases coordination barriers among elites, increasing their bargaining power relative to the dictator and making it more difficult for dictators to appoint and dismiss coalition members at will. The second dimension is whether elites have control over the security forces (central to Chapters 2 and 3). When elites have control over the security forces, it gives them access to troops and weaponry. This increases their ability to carry out a coup and makes it easier for elites to unseat the dictator.

Chapter 2 examines both of these dimensions in more detail, laying out the key theoretical arguments from which we build throughout the study. The chapter focuses on how the institutional structure of dictatorships affects leadership survival. We contend that it is easiest for elites to unseat leaders in military dictatorships, followed by single-party dictatorships, and lastly personalist dictatorships. Military leaders face the highest risk of being overthrown by their erstwhile supporters both because the preexisting hierarchical organization of the military helps coalition members overcome coordination problems and also because coalition members control arms and troops. At the other extreme, personalist leaders face few credible threats of overthrow. Their supporters, far from being organized into a preexisting structure that can help to overcome coordination problems, often compete with one another for the leader's favor. Personalist dictators select members of their coalition at will and choose individuals who pose little threat to their continued rule. In single-party regimes, the party organization reduces the costs of coordination but does not give members of the elite coalition access to the physical means to overthrow the leader by force. We test our expectation by examining leadership survival rates across dictatorships.

Chapter 3 examines how the makeup of dictatorships affects the likelihood that regimes will be participants in escalatory cross-border

conflicts. To generate expectations about what dictatorships in different institutional settings will do, we look at how dictators differ in their ability to show their resolve during interstate disputes. In democracies, when leaders make public threats, and then back down, voters punish them for having done so. By going public with their demands, democratic leaders establish a hands-tying mechanism, creating domestic costs that they would suffer if they fail to follow through with their threats. In dictatorships, since ordinary citizens cannot routinely oust dictators, the ability of dictators to show that their threats are credible depends on how well elites can threaten to overthrow the dictator for poor foreign policy choices. Because military leaders face a greater risk of being ousted by their elite support group (as we show in Chapter 2), they should be the most capable of generating high domestic costs for backing down on their threats, followed by single-party dictators, and lastly personalist dictators. Consequently, target states should perceive threats from military dictators to be more credible than those from personalist or single-party dictators, because they know that military leaders will face a high probability of being ousted if they fail after issuing a challenge. Target states back down in disputes when they perceive the threat to be credible (Schultz 1999; Prins 2003; Weeks 2008). Therefore, when military dictators threaten other states, the dispute should be less likely to escalate. We test this expectation by looking at the likelihood that conflict will escalate given the regime type of the state that provokes it.

Chapter 4 extends this analysis and examines how the institutional structure of the dictatorship influences the ability of dictators to accurately judge the credibility of threats sent by their adversaries. In order for signaling advantages to matter, as claimed by James Fearon (1994) and others, target states must be able to correctly identify when signals are credible. Leaders' ability to accurately read signals depends on the quality of the military intelligence that they receive. With low-quality intelligence, leaders are more likely to misread signals and make foreign policy errors. In dictatorships, leaders receive information on security matters from their elite advisory group. Paradoxically, when leaders have more power over the composition of this group, it decreases the caliber of military intelligence they receive. Leaders select individuals who are less likely to overthrow them, but who are also less competent. Elites who are entirely dependent on the dictator will refrain from reporting any information the

dictator does not want to hear, out of fear of reprisal. As we discuss in Chapter 2, because personalist dictators do not bargain with a unified support group, they have greater control over selection to the advisory group and are often able to remove anyone with the ability to challenge their rule. Consequently, their advisory group is more likely to exclude those who might also provide them with the most sophisticated advice. In military and single-party dictatorships, by contrast, elites usually have to work their way up the party or military ladder to reach their positions. As a result, they are typically better-trained than are their counterparts in personalist dictatorships, where elites tend to be friends or family members of the dictator. We argue that in comparison to other dictators, personalist dictators should be more likely to receive low-quality information from their subordinates and, as a result, more likely to misread threats sent by their adversaries. We test this by examining the likelihood that dictators will misread signals sent to them during foreign policy disputes and commit foreign policy errors.

Chapter 5 looks at how the institutional makeup of dictatorships makes it easier or more difficult for dictators to enact significant policy changes. Policies in dictatorships essentially require the tacit support of two actors: the dictator and the elite support coalition. In many ways, the role of each of these two actors is analogous to that of a veto player. That is, the leader of the regime acts as an individual veto player, and the elite coalition functions as a collective veto player. We argue that the makeup of the collective veto player differs fundamentally across dictatorships. As we discuss in Chapters 2 and 4, personalist dictators have a greater say in the selection of their elite supporters than do military or single-party dictators (since no autonomous party or military institution controls elite recruitment). Because of this, they can select individuals whose preferences mirror their own and eliminate any who resist policy change. In personalist dictatorships, the collective veto player shares the ideal preference point of the individual veto player, making it easier for the two to agree on policy. Military and single-party dictators do not have this liberty and cannot ensure that their support coalition is predominantly comprised of those individuals who agree with them. Even though they can usually eliminate a few opponents, they cannot arbitrarily replace all members of their support group as personalist rulers can. In military and single-party dictatorships, the collective veto player is somewhat ideologically heterogeneous (even in ideologically dog-

matic regimes) and does not always share the ideal preference point of the individual veto player. This makes it more difficult for the two players to reach agreements on policy, reducing the likelihood of large swings in policy. Therefore, we expect that military and single-party dictatorships will exhibit the most policy stability and personalist dictatorships the least. We test this by examining how easy or hard it is for dictatorships to enact big policy changes.

Concluding our study, Chapter 6 emphasizes how the institutional structure of dictatorships in many ways determines the behavior of authoritarian regimes and the political outcomes that result. Whether dictatorships are party-based, military-based, or neither largely defines the nature of leader-elite interactions and, consequently, influences politics. Institutional differences across dictatorships help to explain multiple political outcomes, such as why some dictatorships are more likely to escalate interstate conflicts, why some dictatorships are more likely to enact dramatic policy changes, and why some dictators seem to rule forever while others are easily overthrown.

Conclusion

The internal architecture of autocracies plays a key role in shaping the relationship between leaders and their elite supporters. Understanding how the institutional makeup of dictatorships affects the nature of leader-elite relations not only aids in the development of our theoretical understanding of autocratic politics, but also has serious foreign policy implications. Given the persistent centrality of notorious dictatorships to the foreign policy agendas of many of the world's states, identifying who the key actors are in dictatorships and the ways in which they are politically vulnerable is of fundamental importance.

This study is informed by influential work in the field of authoritarian politics that examines how internal struggles for power are shaped by differing institutional contexts (such as Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Geddes 2003, 2004; Haber 2006; Lust-Okar 2005; Magaloni 2006). The theoretical mechanisms that we propose, while deeply rooted in this body of research, expand its scope considerably by generating a wide array of testable expectations for how authoritarianism affects both domestic and international political outcomes. These mechanisms are remarkably simple and based on just two key

dimensions: whether elites share membership in a unifying institution and whether elites have control over the security forces. By identifying shortcuts for understanding political processes in dictatorships, this study helps to reduce some of the mystery that shrouds these regimes, enabling broad advancements in our understanding of them to crystallize and come to the fore.

Notes

1. As Adam Przeworski recently noted: “Dictatorships are by far the most understudied area in comparative politics. We need to start thinking about it” (“Adam Przeworski: Capitalism, Democracy, and Science” 2003).

2. Domestic institutions can help mitigate competition among elites, which we discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.

3. Though leaders in authoritarian regimes need the support of a certain number of individuals in order to stay in power, they do not need the backing of each and every member of the elite. Most elite citizens support the dictator, but there may be some who do not. The exact number of elites required to keep the dictator in power is unknown and varies from regime to regime.

4. Though this study emphasizes elite politics, governance by a political party or professionalized military affects more than just elite-leader relations. It also impacts the nature of most other regime institutions, such as electoral, legislative, and security.

5. For more information on these categorizations, see Geddes 2003.

6. According to Paul Brooker (2000), modern authoritarianism differs substantially from earlier forms of authoritarian rule in that monarchs and chiefs are no longer the primary individuals in power. Amos Perlmutter (1981) points out that modern authoritarianism depends on the existence of political elites, popular support, political mobilization, and specialized political structures and institutions.

7. See Haber 2006 and Magaloni 2008 for a further critique of this theory. For a discussion of the quantitative methods used in the test of this theory, see Clarke and Stone 2008; the authors find that when the appropriate methods are implemented, the results fail to support the predictions of the theory.

8. See Geddes 2004 for an in-depth analysis of the personalization of dictatorships and regime consolidation.

9. Though we assume that all leaders try to maximize power, this is not to say that all factions within the regime share the same goal. As multiple studies have shown, elites in military dictatorships often *choose* to leave power as a result of factional infighting (Finer 1975; Bienen 1978; Decalo 1976; Kennedy 1974; Van Doorn 1968).

10. The most central features of autocracies rarely change after the first three years in power (Geddes 2003).