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The World of Dictatorial Institutions

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The contrast between democracy and dictatorship – in structures, policies, and performance – has been the object of intense scrutiny. Yet little consensus exists over the definition of regime type. What cases qualify as "democracies"? Which cases constitute the universe of "dictatorships"? The latter question is easy to answer when we encounter the ferocity of a Joseph Stalin or a Pol Pot. No one would quarrel with labeling their regimes as dictatorships. But other regimes are more controversial. For almost seven decades, a new president in Mexico was elected every six years. Nevertheless, the same party's candidate always won. Or consider Singapore, where Lee Kuan Yew crushed political competition for over thirty years. Yet continuous measures of regime type rate him somewhere in between "most autocratic" and "most democratic."

Part of the problem is that dictatorial rulers are quite inventive in how they organize their rule. Decision-making power is concentrated in everything from juntas to politburos to family councils, for example. Yet the institutional inventiveness of dictators is most apparent when they govern with nominally democratic institutions, such as legislatures and political parties. Dictators frequently govern with legislatures, some of which have formal law-making powers, whereas others serve only to "advise and counsel." Membership to assemblies

may be by appointment or by election. In elections, candidates may use party labels or may be forced to run as independents. Party identification may mean little if political space is monopolized by a single party. But many dictatorships allow for multiple parties, picking and choosing the types of parties to ban. Of course, some dictators rule without any such institutions. The institutional diversity, however, makes it difficult to identify a consistent set of criteria by which to define and classify dictatorships.

The other reason for the confusion is that the historical usage of the term *dictatorship* originated in ancient Rome, where it was identified with very clear and specific institutional traits – in sharp contrast to contemporary usage. Over time, however, the understanding of what constitutes dictatorship evolved due to political manipulations of the term. As a result, a regime type that originally was well-defined by its rules became known as a regime type characterized by the absence of rules.

What are dictatorships? Who are dictators? In what ways do they organize their rule using nominally democratic institutions? The answers to these questions are mired in contemporary controversies. To grasp the source of these disagreements, it is necessary to track the historical understanding of this regime type. This chapter, then, begins with a brief account of this historical evolution as a means to understanding contemporary debates over what constitutes dictatorship. I adopt a minimalist definition of dictatorship to identify the post–World War II sample of cases to study. To impose a minimal amount of meaningful order on the dictatorial zoo, I classify dictators into three types: monarchical, military, and civilian. Finally, the chapter shows the institutional diversity of dictatorships in the various ways they combine nominally democratic legislatures and political parties. From this chapter, which delineates the universe of cases for analysis and highlights the empirical patterns to be explained, a systematic study of the emergence and effects of dictatorial institutions can proceed.

1.2 WHAT IS DICTATORSHIP?

Defining dictatorship should be simple: it is obviously the opposite of democracy. At least, titles such as *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* and *The Economic Origins of Dictatorship and*

Democracy would have us believe.[1] Yet defining dictatorship is not a trivial matter. Its conception has evolved from an institutional device used in ancient Rome to a system of rule that in modern times is frequently associated with the absence of institutions and constraints. The transformation of its meaning was the result of several distinct moments when the original term was contorted and twisted for political ends. The result, by the mid-twentieth century, was a negative definition of dictatorship that defined this form of rule by the absence of attributes associated with democracy. Yet the neglect of institutional forms in nondemocratic regimes is not justified, as will be demonstrated by a description of the post–World War II sample of dictatorships. Authoritarian regimes vary widely in their institutional arrangements, and the task for the remainder of the book will be to examine the reasons for and the effects of this variance.

1.2.1 Historical Usage

In contemporary usage, the terms *tyranny* and *dictatorship* maintain close association. Yet this was not always the case. Although tyranny was recognized as a type of regime since Aristotle, it initially was not linked to the concept of dictatorship. For one, the term *dictatorship*, originating in ancient Rome, postdates Aristotle. For two, in its original conception, dictatorship had a very distinct and specific meaning: rule by a leader who was selected by the Consul in Rome to govern during periods of emergency when external war or internal rebellion threatened the existence of the polity.[2] The term of the dictator was to last no more than six months, and he could not remain in power after the Consul that appointed him stepped down.[3] During his term, the dictator was authorized to use whatever power was deemed necessary to deal with the crisis at hand with the goal of restoring the old constitutional order.

Within such a concise description of the institution are several aspects worthy of highlighting. First, regular institutions of the state, such

[1] Moore's (1966) classic work has been followed by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006).
[2] The following description of dictatorship during the Roman period relies on the account of Nicolet (2004).
[3] Initially, limits on the term of the dictator were unspecified; he was to abdicate power as soon as the task for which he was appointed was completed.

as magistrates or the Senate, determined whether the situation at hand required the nomination of a dictator for a resolution. Yet those who decided on the necessity of a dictatorship were not allowed to nominate themselves for the position. Second, the position of dictator was explicitly designed to be occupied by one man; collective leadership might stymie attempts to resolve the crisis. Third, the dictatorship had a broad range of power but not the authority to abolish other state institutions. Fourth, the dictator was never chosen by the people.[4] Finally, the goal of dictatorial rule was restoration of the old political order.

Within these institutional parameters, seventy-six dictatorships existed in Rome from 501 to 202 B.C. The majority of dictatorships during this period were engaged in either military campaigns against foreign powers or attempts at domestic reconciliation but not in repression of sedition. As a consequence, dictatorship was not associated with brutal or repressive rule.

Sulla, a Roman general who refused to accept his dismissal and went on to march on Rome, revived the institution of dictatorship in 82 B.C. in an attempt to legitimate his rule. Significant differences, however, existed between traditional dictatorships and Sulla's regime. For one, because Sulla obtained power only after his armies conquered Rome and massacred his enemies, his regime marks the first time that a dictatorship was established by the use of military force. The excessive brutality that Sulla used to neutralize his opponents led to an association of dictatorship with terror. Moreover, in contrast to past dictators whose tenures were understood to be limited given the nature of the problem to be addressed, Sulla's dictatorship involved the complete placement of power – military, executive, legislative, judicial – in one man to remake the political order. The notion of dictatorship to restore a previous political order was over.

Oddly enough, however, Sulla still adhered to the term limitations attached to the title of dictator. In fact, after a short period, he stepped down from power and returned to private life. It was not until January 44 B.C., when Caesar accepted the title of "dictator for life," that the temporariness of dictatorial power was abandoned.[5]

[4] With one exception in 211 B.C. Yet the decision to allow for popular participation was very controversial within the Senate. See Nicolet (2004) for more details.

[5] Caesar initially had accepted dictatorial terms of one and ten years (Nicolet 2004).

That the concept of dictatorship was already corrupted by Sulla and Caesar was often forgotten by later advocates. In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli (Book I, Chapter XXXIV; 1950: 203) lauded the Roman invention, observing: "... truly, of all the institutions of Rome, this one deserves to be counted amongst those to which she was most indebted for her greatness and dominion." The reason was simply because processes of collective decision-making and even laws themselves may be inflexible and, hence, ill-suited instruments for resolving crises. In a similar vein, Rousseau (Book IV, Chapter VI; 1987: 217) remarked approvingly, "... a supreme leader is named who silences all the laws and briefly suspends the sovereign authority. In such a case, the general will is not in doubt, and it is evident that the first intention of the people is that the state should not perish." For defenders of both absolutist and liberal states, then, dictatorship constituted a solution due to its decisiveness. But its temporary nature was equally important for otherwise, "... once the pressing need has passed, the dictatorship becomes tyrannical or needless" (Book IV, Chapter VI; 1987: 218).

Aside from these mentions, however, dictatorship received scant reference. In the nineteenth century, for example, the term was used during only two periods: between 1789 and 1815 in reference to France and briefly after 1852 to denote the Second Empire. What is noteworthy about the use of the term in the former period is how dictatorship no longer referred to rule by just one man but to rule by a group. In October 1793, the French National Convention suspended the constitution of the same year and established a provisional government that served as a dictatorship of a revolutionary group: the Committee of Public Health. Another feature of the original Roman conception – rule by one man – was changed yet again.

It was only a matter of time, then, that the term *dictatorship* was used to refer to not just a group but to an entire class. The term resurfaced after 1917, when Lenin and his comrades used the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" in self-congratulatory terms. Yet in just a few years, the term *dictatorship* was imbued with pejorative connotations as liberal opponents of the Fascist Italian and Nazi regimes used the label to describe what they were fighting against: "a highly oppressive and arbitrary form of rule, established by force or intimidation, enabling a person or group to monopolize political power without any constitutional limits, thus destroying representative government,

political rights, and any organized opposition" (Baehr and Richter 2004: 25). Following these trends, the Socialist International did its own about-face in 1933, using "dictatorship" as a negative description of the Soviet regime as well. In any case, the employment of the term in reference to both the self-proclaimed dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia and the fascist dictatorship in Italy were deviations from the original Roman conception. The fascists were never committed to any temporary notion of power; and although the dictatorship of the proletariat was to be temporary in nature, as a fundamental step in the transformation from capitalism to socialism, it would obviously not aim for restoration of the old order.

Events of the interwar period were important in that they precipitated an attempt to save the original notion of dictatorship.[6] Attempting to save the notion of exceptional power and to counter the Bolshevik use of the term, Carl Schmitt distinguished commissarial from sovereign dictatorship. Commissarial dictatorship conforms to the original Roman concept of dictatorship. With sovereign dictatorship, Schmitt collapses the distinction between normal and exceptional times, claiming that the dictator has authority to restore the preconstitutional will of the people, even if it means altering the constitution itself. At the time, Schmitt was writing to justify giving dictatorial powers to Germany's *reichspresident* to deal with escalating economic and social crises. Schmitt's conception of sovereign dictatorship is important because it cements an important alignment of theory and practice in the understanding of the term: this type of dictatorship may be neither temporary nor restorative of the prior constitutional order.

The positive connotation of dictatorship, however, was never to take hold. As Baehr and Richter (2004: 26) observe: "well into the 1940s, in liberal, constitutional states, dictatorship continued to be used as the polar opposite of democracy in countless books, as well as in political discourse." During and immediately after the war, because democracy was thought to embody all that was good, its antithesis, by definition, was negative.

The emphasis on the distinction between democracy and dictatorship is similarly a twentieth-century phenomenon. Regime distinctions historically have been threefold since Aristotle first distinguished

[6] This discussion is from McCormick (2004).

regimes by number of rulers. The distinction among monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy collapsed in two ways. Machiavelli was the first to distinguish between government of the one versus government of the assembly (whether of the few or the many), thereby setting monarchy apart from other forms of regime. Bobbio (1989) attributes the second collapse of the threefold regime distinction to Hans Kelsen, who claimed distinctions on the basis of number to be superficial. Instead, Kelsen proposed distinguishing on the presence or absence of political freedom: "Politically free is he who is subject to a legal order in the creation of which he participated" (Kelsen 1945: 284). The crucial distinction, then, is between autonomy and heteronomy: democratic forms of government are those in which laws are made by the same people to whom they apply (i.e., autonomous norms), whereas in autocratic states, lawmakers differ from those to whom the law is addressed (i.e., heteronomous norms). As a result, "it is now more precise to distinguish between two types of constitution, instead of three: democracy and autocracy" (Quoted in Bobbio 1989: 137).

With this dichotomy, contemporary focus fell on the task of defining democracy, leaving dictatorship as the residual category, defined only in terms of what it is not. Dictatorships are regimes without competitive elections, without rule of law, without political and civil rights, without regular alternation in power. These attributes may well characterize dictatorships relative to democracies, but such definitions emphasizing the relative absence of traits also masks significant heterogeneity in the organization of these regimes.

1.2.2 Contemporary Controversies

Dictatorships are defined here as regimes in which rulers acquire power by means other than competitive elections.[7] Leaders may come to power by a coup d'état, a palace putsch, or a revolution. They may take power themselves or be installed by military or foreign powers. The critical distinction is that they do not accede to power by

[7] Except when the ruler first entered power by election and then consolidated his power at the expense of democracy. In these cases (e.g., Marcos in the Philippines, Park in South Korea, Fujimori in Peru), the leader's reign is considered a dictatorship from the beginning of his elected term.

a "competitive struggle for people's votes" (Schumpeter 1976). This conception of dictatorship, although not an advancement toward a positive definition, is useful for both practical and conceptual reasons. These reasons are discussed in turn.

The above definition of dictatorship is a minimal one, focusing on the procedural rather than substantive aspects of the regime type. The purpose of a minimalist definition is primarily for analytical clarity. Definitions of regime type that incorporate a number of attributes suffer from a number of problems. First, and most important, a multiplicity of attributes makes verifying causal connections more difficult. Consider, for example, Linz's (1970) four defining elements of authoritarianism: limited political pluralism, distinctive mentalities rather than a guiding ideology, little political mobilization, and a leader who exercises power predictably even if within ill-defined limits. If authoritarianism is defined on the basis of these four dimensions and we were to find a relationship between authoritarianism and economic development, what then should we conclude about the causal story behind the observed relationship? Is it the limited political mobilization or the predictable leadership or some combination of these factors that causes the observed patterns? With dictatorships distinguished in this way, we hardly can say.

Second, broad definitions can entail substantive notions that either generate tautologies or limit the applicability of the concept produced. Evans's (1989) distinction between "developmentalist" and "predatory" states already hints at the type of development outcomes they will generate. Not surprisingly, bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes will pursue exclusionary policies because they are defined, in part, by the fact that this is what they do (O'Donnell 1979). Even if we were to discover that these regimes, in fact, pursue inclusive policies, we would be able to do nothing more than comment on the validity of the label's criteria.

Third, although not a problem inherent to broad-based definitions, a strong correlation seems to exist between the number of attributes and the amorphousness of these concepts. "Distinctive mentalities," for example, is difficult to measure or even identify.

Finally, by appending more and more attributes to a definition of dictatorship, we run the risk of creating an empty set or, at the very least, neglecting the most important distinctions among regimes.

Mexico, for example, in spite of nearly a century of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) dominance, was thought to be a case of a dictatorship with qualifications. Yet the variety of dictatorships based on other dimensions (e.g., freedoms and rights, civilian control of the military) should not cloud the central distinction that is common to all dictatorships and sets them apart from democracies – the absence of competitive elections.

The reasons for using minimalist criteria do not constitute a justification for the substance of the criteria. In fact, the focus on elections as the distinguishing feature between democracy and dictatorship is not uncontroversial.[8] Given a minimalist approach, then, why focus on elections?

First, the focus on elections is compatible with most of the theoretical issues that animate empirical research on political regimes. The prospect of acceding to power by regular, contested elections is thought to produce incentives for political actors that are different from those produced by irregular, nonelective methods of selection. Different incentives will lead to different behavior (e.g., policies) that then should produce different outcomes. Consider the impact of regime type on economic development, for example. According to arguments made famous by Locke and later the framers of the U.S. constitution, democracy was believed to be detrimental to political order and economic development because elections without suffrage restrictions would enable the poor to elect demagogues who would seize and redistribute the assets of the propertied classes.[9] More recent arguments, in contrast, claim that dictatorships are bad for development because without electoral constraints, dictators are free to extract rents and substitute the provision of private goods for public ones. In either case, elections are the reason why political actors are expected to behave differently and produce different outcomes in democracy and dictatorship.[10]

[8] For some background on this debate, see Cheibub and Gandhi (2004), Collier and Adcock (1999), Diamond (2002), and Munck and Verkuilen (2002).

[9] The argument was repackaged in the twentieth century with the fear that democratic governments would capitulate to demands for consumption (rather than investment) made by workers who, of course, were also voters (de Schweinitz 1964, O'Donnell 1979).

[10] Elections also feature prominently in arguments about the relationship between regime type and education (Brown 1999, Brown and Hunter 2004, Habibi 1994),

Second, distinguishing regime type on the basis of elections reminds us that even if dictators have other nominally democratic institutions, such as legislatures and parties, they are still dictators. Political life is organized fundamentally differently in systems in which leaders are chosen by competitive elections and in systems where they are not. As Przeworski (1991) explains, democracy is distinct from dictatorship as a political system in which no actor can control outcomes with certainty, either by altering chances *ex ante* or overturning outcomes *ex post*. The most tangible signifier of this uncertainty are competitive elections because the result is "an *instruction* what the winners and the losers should and should not do: the winners should move into a White or Pink House or perhaps even a *palacio* . . . The losers should not move into the House and should accept getting not more than whatever is left" (Przeworski 1999: 45). This point is revisited and elaborated in the Conclusion because it has implications for how we think about dictatorial parties and legislatures and whether their presence makes some authoritarian regimes "more democratic" than others.

I use Przeworski et al.'s (2000) dichotomous classification that distinguishes regimes by electoral criteria. The resulting sample encompasses 140 countries that experienced dictatorship at some point during the period 1946 to 2002, or 4,607 country-year observations. In Figure 1.1, all countries that have been ruled by dictators at some point during the postwar period are shaded. During the 1970s, 75 percent of all countries were dictatorships. By the mid-1990s, that percentage had fallen to around 50 percent.

In most cases, the identification of dictatorships is uncontroversial in that the most prominent cross-national regime classifications agree. The correlations among Freedom House, Polity, and Przeworski et al. (2000) range from 88 to 95 percent. Even though Przeworski et al. (2000) is a dichotomous measure, its correlation with both Freedom House and Polity are high because these continuous measures have bimodal distributions. Once the easy cases at the extremes of the distribution (e.g., North Korea, Iran, Sweden, and Great Britain) are excluded, however, the correlations become significantly weaker: for example, only 0.75 between Polity and Freedom House. The difficulty appears

economic reforms (Haggard and Kaufman 1995, Hellman 1998), interstate war (Fearon 1994, Reiter and Stam 1998), and many other things.