Political Institutions under Dictatorship

Often dismissed as window dressing, nominally democratic institutions, such as legislatures and political parties, play an important role in non-democratic regimes. In a comprehensive cross-national study of all non-democratic states from 1946 to 2002 that examines the political uses of these institutions by dictators, Jennifer Gandhi finds that legislative and partisan institutions are an important component in the operation and survival of authoritarian regimes. She examines how and why these institutions are useful to dictatorships in maintaining power. In their efforts to neutralize threats to their power and to solicit cooperation from society, autocratic leaders use these institutions to organize concessions to potential opposition. The use of legislatures and parties to co-opt opposition results in significant institutional effects on policies and outcomes under dictatorship.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521897952

First published 2008

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Gandhi, Jennifer, 1975–
Political institutions under dictatorship / Jennifer Gandhi.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-89795-2 (hardback)
1. Dictatorship – History – 20th century. 2. Dictatorship – Case studies.
3. Political parties. 4. Legislative bodies. I. Title.
JC495.G36 2008
321.9–dc22 2008025515

ISBN 978-0-521-89795-2 hardback

Permission to reprint material is gratefully acknowledged. Portions of Chapter 3 appear in Gandhi, Jennifer, and Adam Przeworski, "Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorship," 2006, *Economics and Politics* 18, 1: 1–26; portions of Chapter 5 appear in Gandhi, Jennifer, "Dictatorial Institutions and Their Impact on Economic Growth," forthcoming, *European Journal of Sociology*; and portions of Chapter 6 appear in Gandhi, Jennifer, and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," 2007, *Comparative Political Studies* 40, 11: 1279–1301.

To my parents and Neil

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Acknowledgments

My intellectual debts are many, but first and foremost are my dues to Adam Przeworski. From him, I have learned much, but the lessons that stay with me are the ones he taught by example: to aspire to ask big questions and to embrace the process of retooling in order to answer those questions. I thank others from whom I have learned valuable lessons: Bernard Manin for his carefulness, John Roemer for his clarity, and Stephen Holmes for his boldness. In addition, my thanks to Leonard Wantchekon, Youssef Cohen, Jonathan Nagler, and Kanchan Chandra for their encouragement at various stages in the process.

My time in New York was enriched by a cohort in graduate school that spanned many years and countries. I thank the members of the Thursday group who provided much criticism, made easier to swallow with much laughter: Suzy Fry, Matt Golder, Sona Nadenichek Golder, Wonik Kim, Covadonga Meseguer, and Sebastian Saiegh. Wonik and Sebas, in particular, were loyal companions who provided advice that made me a better scholar and, often, a better person. I am grateful to Carmela Lutmar and Jeff Lax for their support. José Cheibub and Jim Vreeland deserve special thanks for their suggestions on my work and their counsel on becoming a scholar in one's own right. Finally, I consider myself lucky to have been part of the melting pot that came together in the Department of Politics at New York University: My thanks to Despina Alexiadou, Tamar Asadurian, Dulce Manzano, and Julio Ríos Figueroa.

Since graduate school, the political science department at Emory University has provided a supportive environment. I thank members of the Political Economy Workshop and, in addition, Dan Reiter, Tom Remington, and Jeff Staton for their feedback on my work. For their encouragement and advice, I am in debt to Cliff Carrubba, David Davis, Rick Doner, and Alex Hicks. My thanks to Amy Liu and Jeffrey Kucik for their research assistance. In addition, the Stanford Comparative Politics Workshop, Jason Brownlee, Bill Keech, and Beatriz Magaloni provided helpful feedback on either parts of or the whole manuscript. Finally, my thanks to Eric Crahan at Cambridge University Press for his heartening interest in the project and his steady guidance in its completion.

Through this experience, I learned that writing a book is at times a gratifying experience and, at other times, an excruciating one. I owe many thanks to Michael Owens, Maisha Fisher, Tavishi Bhasin, Leslie Davis, and Ravish Bhasin for helping me remember that the tempest should stay in the teapot. I also thank Joanne Fox-Przeworski for her endless hospitality and kindness.

Life in New York was a formative moment in no small part due to three people without whom my life would have been all that much poorer. A constant companion since graduate school, Melissa Schwartzberg always has shown a generosity of spirit in all things that helped me complete this book and so much more. In addition, I thank Carol Hsu and Carissa Montgomery, the best of friends who always forgave my absences and allowed me to pick up our friendship wherever it left off. I am grateful to the three of them for their enduring support and for making me feel at home whenever I am back in the city.

Finally, I thank Neil for his patience with an itinerant sister and his willingness to close the gap as we grow older. His sincerity and sense of humor help me keep things in perspective. In addition, heartfelt thanks to my parents, Josephine and Niranjan, for encouraging us to do the best we can in all things and for indulging me my intellectual curiosities. This book is dedicated to the three of them.

Introduction

Why do nondemocratic rulers govern with democratic institutions, such as legislatures and political parties? One view is that these institutions under dictatorship are mere shams. Scholars and policy-makers alike have pronounced the irrelevance of formal institutions under dictatorship. In discussing the role of political institutions on regime change, Gasiorowski (1995: 883) writes: "Huntington's (1968) argument about the importance of institutionalization also applies under authoritarian regimes, but consociationalism, party system structure, electoral rules, and the type of executive system are largely irrelevant and therefore presumably have little effect. . . ." A USAID report (n.d.: 1), in describing communist regimes in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, states more bluntly: "Elections were a sham. Parliaments had no real power. Basic democratic freedoms – free speech, the freedom to assembly and organize, the right to form independent parties did not exist." The conclusion is clear: nominally democratic institutions constitute mere window dressing that dictators can point to as evidence of their democratic credentials.

Yet those who encourage the formation of these institutions in the interests of promoting democracy imply another view. As Jeane Kirkpatrick (1979: 37) observed: "democratic governments have come into being slowly, after extended prior experience with more limited forms of participation during which leaders have reluctantly grown accustomed to tolerating dissent and opposition. . . ." As a result, nongovernmental organizations, such as the National Democracy Initiative

for International Affairs (NDI), provide countries with "... assistance in building their democratic structures. These include: national legislatures and local governments that function with openness and competence; broad-based political parties that are vehicles for public policy debates; and nonpartisan civic organizations that promote democratic values and citizen participation."[1]

In this view, semiautonomous parties should provide political leaders and followers the opportunity to learn and practice the "civic culture." Electoral contests and legislative debates should enable opposition forces to make progress, even if incremental, in liberalizing the regime. The hope, of course, is that liberalization sets the stage for democratic transitions, even if with disappointment; we have witnessed enough instances in which this has not been the case. But if this anticipated sequence of events motivates encouragement of elections, parties, and assemblies under nondemocratic rule, then it must be the case that we believe these institutions serve as more than mere ornamentation. Mere drapery cannot sow the seeds of destruction of dictatorships.

The variation in dictatorial institutions is immense. During the post–World War II period, the proportion of nondemocratic regimes with legislatures varies from 60 to 88 percent. Legislatures are ubiquitous in party dictatorships, but less so under military rule and monarchy. More heterogeneity exists in the number of political parties tolerated by authoritarian regimes, whether they are allowed simply to legally exist or also to obtain seats within the legislature. The share of dictatorships in any given year that has banned parties ranges from 8 to 25 percent. Although the majority of nondemocracies have allowed for multiple political parties to exist (58 percent, counting by country-year observations), only in half of these cases are parties other than the one organized by the regime permitted to obtain seats within a legislative body.

The aggregate patterns are a reflection of some infamous examples. Communist dictatorships always have been organized around the regime party or a front in which auxiliary parties are forced to join alongside in an assembly. Lenin's invention was copied by other authoritarian incumbents, such as William Tubman of Liberia and

[1] http://www.ndi.org/about/about.asp.

Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, even if they did not import the ideological trappings. Other nondemocratic rulers, such as Mohammed Mahathir in Malaysia and Anastasio Samoza in Nicaragua, allowed for the formation of multiple parties that participated within legislatures. Still other dictators, such as Idi Amin in Uganda and Augusto Pinochet in Chile, banned legislatures and parties upon seizing power. Incumbents also may change their institutional arrangements like musical chairs. King Hussein, for example, closed and reopened the Jordanian parliament four times. What becomes apparent is that the institutional variation in dictatorships is bounded by neither geographic nor temporal considerations.

The two views of nominally democratic institutions under dictatorship, then, appear contradictory. One says that legislatures and political parties are nothing more than window dressing with little expected effects for policies or outcomes, whereas, in another view, these institutions are meaningful precursors for greater liberalization if not more dramatic democratic change. Yet neither view can account for the variation in the behavior of authoritarian rulers and their institutional choices. If these institutions are costless window dressing that provides reputational benefits on the international stage, why do not all dictators have them? In turn, if these institutions have the potential to undermine autocratic rule, why would any incumbent create or tolerate them? Whether nondemocratic rulers should either promote or shun these institutions, their behaviors should be consistent.

If parties do not compete and legislatures do not represent under dictatorship, what is the purpose of these institutions? Are there systematic reasons for why some nondemocratic rulers govern with these institutions, whereas others do not? Furthermore, if institutions are the product of conscious choices, do they have effects on policies and outcomes under dictatorship?

0.1 THE ARGUMENT

Dictators face two basic problems of governance. First, as rulers who hold power without the legitimacy of having been chosen by their citizens, they must prevent attempts to undermine their legitimacy and usurp power. In other words, they must thwart challenges to their rule. Second, autocrats also must solicit the cooperation of those they

rule. Even if their interests lie only in accumulating wealth and power, incumbents will have more to amass if their countries are affluent and orderly. Internal prosperity can be generated only if citizens contribute their capital and their labor to productive activities. Autocrats, in other words, need compliance and cooperation.

Yet the severity of the problems of ensuring compliance and generating cooperation vary across authoritarian incumbents. The degree to which they face serious threats to their rule depends on the strength of the potential opposition within society. Incumbents have more to fear from a united, broad-based resistance movement. When the opposition is weak – whether due to an unpopular ideology or collective action problems – rulers have less need to manage outside groups. Similarly, the degree to which dictators must solicit cooperation from citizens to generate prosperity and rents for themselves differs. If rulers have access to external sources of revenue, for example, they may rely less on the cooperation of domestic groups for the creation of wealth.

To both thwart rebellion and solicit cooperation, dictators must make concessions to outside groups. Concessions may come in the form of rents; the dictator may agree to distribute some of his spoils to certain segments of society as a solution to these two problems of governance. Yet the potential opposition may demand more, and incumbents may have to make policy concessions as well.

To organize policy compromises, dictators need nominally democratic institutions. Legislatures and parties serve as a forum in which the regime and opposition can announce their policy preferences and forge agreements. For the potential opposition, assemblies and parties provide an institutionalized channel through which they can affect decision-making even if in limited policy realms. For incumbents, these institutions are a way in which opposition demands can be contained and answered without appearing weak. If authoritarian leaders face a weak opposition and need little cooperation, they will not need to make concessions and, therefore, will not need institutions. But if they must impede opposition mobilization and solicit outside cooperation, rulers may need to make policy concessions, in which case they need institutions to organize these compromises.

As a forum through which dictators can make policy concessions, nominally democratic institutions are instruments of co-optation. As such, they determine the way in which political life is organized in

dictatorships and, consequently, affect the policies and outcomes that are produced. Legislatures and parties facilitate policy concessions that result in policy differences across differently organized authoritarian regimes. Variations in policy translate into differences in economic outcomes. But assuming that incumbents are able to observe with some accuracy the conditions that dictate the choice to institutionalize and then choose their institutions as a strategic response to these conditions, we should observe no significant differences in tenure on the basis of institutions. These are the claims to be elaborated and empirically assessed for all post–World War II dictatorships. Considered together, they not only demonstrate that institutions have effects in dictatorships but also account for the institutional variation across nondemocratic regimes.

0.2 THE STUDY OF INSTITUTIONS IN DICTATORSHIPS

The focus on institutions that long has pervaded the study of democracies is now resurgent in the study of dictatorships. Traditional classifications have recognized – even if implicitly – that dictatorial regimes differ in their organization and bases of support. Arendt (1951) and Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) highlighted the features of totalitarianism, whereas Linz (1970: 254) argued for distinguishing authoritarian regimes because they have "... distinctive ways in which they resolve problems common to all political systems...." Because institutions are precisely those procedures and structures by which actors try to resolve a variety of political problems, we can understand Linz's distinction as one founded on institutionalist criteria.

Moving beyond the distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, comparative politics scholars have identified a number of important types of nondemocratic regimes. The communist totalitarian state eventually evolved into posttotalitarianism (Linz and Stepan 1996), whereas various forms of personalist rule have been identified as sultanism (Chehabi and Linz 1998) or neopatrimonialism (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997). The prevalence of military regimes throughout the developing world stimulated the study of these regimes: their emergence and their organization (e.g., Barros 2002, Finer 1988, Nordlinger 1977, Stepan 1971) as well as their effects on policies and outcomes (e.g., Biglaiser 2002, Remmer 1978, Zuk and Thompson

1982). O'Donnell (1979) identified an important subtype of military regimes in bureaucratic-authoritarianism (see also Collier 1980, Im 1987). Even monarchy, as a subtype of nondemocratic regimes, persists in the contemporary world.

Within these categorizations is an understanding that institutions matter under nondemocratic rule, but which institutions matter depends on the subtype of nondemocratic regime. The literature on bureaucratic-authoritarianism and military regimes in general focuses on the importance of the armed forces, whereas the study of monarchies emphasizes their dynastic structure (Herb 1999). Studies of personalist regimes focus on the nature of executive power that allows for dictatorial leaders to exert tight control. Although these works emphasize important institutional features for each nondemocratic subtype, none of them focus on the role of nominally democratic institutions, such as legislatures and political parties. These institutions are assumed to play a marginal role in these types of nondemocratic regimes.

The exception is the voluminous literature that surrounds the single-party state. Many initial studies of regime parties focused on their description and categorization, providing useful intuitions about the origins and functions of regime parties (Collier 1982, Huntington 1970, Michels 1949, Tucker 1961, Zolberg 1969). More recent work, such as that by Geddes (1999), Slater (2003), Smith (2005), Magaloni (2006), and Brownlee (2007), builds on their insights, making prominent again the study of hegemonic or dominant parties. From this work, we have acquired a better understanding of the origins of regime parties and their maintenance, especially through their combination with other institutions such as elections.[2]

In tandem with theoretical development and the accumulation of evidence from specific countries and regions, the compilation of

[2] Elections under dictatorship are another nominally democratic institution under significant inquiry. Hermet et al. (1978) examine the institution in detail as do more recent works that investigate "hybrid regimes" (Diamond 2002), "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way 2002), and "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler 2006), as well as how nondemocratic incumbents shape electoral rules (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002), perpetuate electoral fraud (Lehoucq 2003, Schedler 2002), and manipulate the economy (Blaydes 2006, Magaloni 2006) to win electoral contests and remain in power. Although these elections are another example of nominally democratic institutions under dictatorship, I do not cover them here because they may serve different roles from those of dictatorial legislatures and parties.

cross-national data on nondemocratic states allows us to determine whether more general statements about the genesis, functioning, and effects of these regimes are supported by evidence. In this regard, Geddes' (1999) categorization of personalist, party, and military regimes and her use of this classification to examine theories regarding the survival of dictatorships and the likelihood of democratic transitions have been path breaking. Her collection of data on dictatorships allows for cross-national empirical tests that often better fit our theories than those based on older regime measures, such as Polity or Freedom House. The result has been a burgeoning of quantitative research on the effects of dictatorial types and institutions on outcomes such as war (Lai and Slater 2006, Peceny et al. 2002), repression (Vreeland 2008), and economic development (Wright 2008).

This work follows contemporary trends in both the emphasis on institutions and the use of various methods to examine the institutionalist account. Yet the argument advanced here and the data used to assess it differ from previous work in a number of important respects. First, a common assumption is that rents are the only means by which dictators build political coalitions. Spoils certainly constitute a significant share of dictatorial concessions, but in this account, policy compromises take center stage because there is no reason to believe that policy is not an important second dimension over which the potential opposition and incumbents may want to bargain. Second, although the idea that rulers trade concessions for broadened political support is not new, the claim that dictatorial legislatures and parties play a significant role in this exchange is novel. As discussed earlier, these institutions frequently have been dismissed as insignificant window dressing. Finally, the claims about the emergence and effects of these institutions are assessed using new cross-national time-series data on the legislative and partisan arrangements of all nondemocratic regimes from 1946 to 2002.

0.3 PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 commences with a brief sketch of our historical understanding of dictatorship, demonstrating how an institutionalized form of rule in ancient Rome devolved into contemporary forms of dictatorship that frequently are thought to operate without institutional

constraints. Yet looking more carefully, we see that in reality dictatorships vary in their institutional structures as illustrated by the different types of dictatorships (e.g., military, civilian, and monarchy) and their nominally democratic institutions (e.g., legislatures and parties). In this opening chapter, I provide an overview of this variation using data from 1946 to 2002 on all dictatorships around the world. Because ultimately the goal is to understand the role of nominally democratic institutions in dictatorships, the focus in this chapter is on providing a systematic picture of the variation in legislative and partisan arrangements.

After a description of the institutional forms under dictatorship, the following two chapters are intended to provide an explanation for the variance. In other words, the question to be answered is: What accounts for the differences in legislative and partisan arrangements across dictatorships? I argue that dictators face two basic problems of governance: first, the need to obtain cooperation from some segments of society and, second, the need to neutralize potential opposition. Dictators can solve these problems by using nominally democratic institutions to share the spoils of power and to make policy concessions. Policy compromises, in particular, require an institutional forum in which demands can be revealed and agreements can be hammered out. Chapter 2 uses three case studies – the ruling family of Kuwait, the monarchy of Morocco after independence, and the military dictatorship of General Rodriguez Lara in Ecuador – to illustrate the logic and plausibility of these arguments. Even though the cases are very different – in historical, cultural, and political contexts – they demonstrate the logic of institutionalization. The cases are not intended as tests of the theory but simply as illustrations of the plausibility of these arguments.

The intuition provided from the cases is used to construct the formal argument elaborated in Chapter 3. The model relates institutional strategies of dictators to the conditions they face, predicting that the number of legislative parties should increase in the dictator's need for cooperation and in the strength of the opposition. A statistical test of this prediction for all the countries for which the requisite data are available between 1946 and 2002 shows this is the case. When dictators need to build support within society, they use legislatures and parties as instruments of co-optation.

For dictatorial institutions to effectively encapsulate the potential opposition, they must offer groups within society some real decision-making power even if in very limited policy realms. Without the hope of policy concessions, the potential opposition has few incentives to participate in nominally democratic institutions. In addition, the crafting of policy compromises requires an arena in which negotiations can occur and deals can be hammered out. Legislatures and parties under dictatorships serve this purpose. As a consequence, institutionalized dictatorships should exhibit differences in policies from their noninstitutionalized counterparts. Chapter 4 provides a quantitative analysis of this observable implication derived from the theory elaborated in the previous chapters. An examination of both civil liberties and government spending for all dictatorships during the postwar period shows that institutions have an effect on government policies about which citizens can form reasonably unified preferences. As such, institutionalized dictatorships are forced to institute more liberal policies regarding citizens' rights to speak freely and to organize collectively as workers and to spend less on the military. Yet the effect of institutions on other types of spending is mixed, likely due to the heterogeneity of preferences citizens may have over distributive goods.

If institutions influence policies under dictatorship, do they also have an impact on outcomes? In Chapter 5, I take up this question, looking specifically at the impact of dictatorial institutions on economic growth. In previous chapters, I argue that legislatures and parties help dictators build their bases of support in part by allowing for some policy concessions to the potential opposition. As a result, these institutions foster greater cooperation between the regime and outside groups, reducing the potential for political instability. In addition, institutions serve as a conduit of information between the two sides. Finally, the willingness of rulers to play the institutional game indicates a measure of policy predictability. For all of these reasons – political stability, greater information, and policy predictability – institutionalized dictatorships are expected to have higher economic growth than noninstitutionalized regimes. A statistical analysis of all dictatorships during the postwar period shows that institutions, in fact, have a positive effect on economic growth.

The last observable implication concerns the political survival of autocrats. In Chapters 2 and 3, I argue that authoritarian rulers choose

to operate with legislatures and parties only when conditions dictate that they must. As a result, depending on how badly dictators need cooperation and the strength of the potential opposition, their degree of institutionalization varies. Yet because dictators formulate their institutional strategies as a best response to the conditions they face, those rulers who choose to rule with institutions should not survive significantly longer than those who govern without them. Chapter 6 provides details of this argument along with an event history analysis of the 558 dictators of the postwar period. The results confirm that nominally democratic institutions do not have a statistically significant impact on their survival in power.

The book closes with a brief conclusion that summarizes the arguments and findings of the previous chapters and addresses whether the presence of legislatures and parties in dictatorships renders these regimes "more democratic." I argue against such a view because these institutions are instruments of co-optation for authoritarian regimes, offering little in the way of representation and accountability to participants and ordinary citizens. In addition, because dictators retain the power to alter and eliminate assemblies and parties, institutionalized dictatorships remain closer in spirit to their noninstitutionalized counterparts than to democracies. Nominally democratic institutions under dictatorship do matter but in ways that differ from their counterparts in democracies. This distinction has implications for our understanding of these regimes and for scholars and policy-makers who would encourage the creation of these institutions for the purpose of facilitating democratic transitions.