

*Part I*

Introduction

## Autocracies as “Organized Certainty”?

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Autocrats try to organize certainty. They do everything they can to minimize threats to their existence. They are afraid of losing power and control and strive to rule out chance. Consider the following note found during my archival research:

In N, there was a pencil in the polling booth, but the pencil was not sharpened. An older woman who – after having received the ballot paper – asked politely what she should do with it was rudely led to the ballot box and was forced to throw in the paper.<sup>1</sup>

The note describes blatant electoral fraud. A woman who wanted to cast her vote was instead forced to hand in an empty paper. Fraud, intimidation, and fear are the most obvious and widespread instruments with which every autocratic regime attempts to maintain control over what is happening in society. Autocrats want to eliminate the possibility of deviance among their citizens.

The irony of this archival note is that the author of this note was a former official of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) who was stationed in the GDR embassy in North Korea. He wrote this memo in 1967 and sent it back to East Berlin.<sup>2</sup> At this time, both countries were deeply autocratic and did not shy away from using all types of electoral fraud. Elections in both countries were manipulated, noncompetitive, not free, and not fair. Nevertheless, the observed electoral fraud in North Korea was deemed important (and unsettling) enough to report back home to Berlin.

<sup>1</sup> My translation; document is PA AA MfAA, C 1088–70: “Information über die Innen- und Außenpolitik der KVDR 1962–1963, 1965–1967,” no place, 1967. The archive is the Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Ministry of Germany in Berlin. It also houses today the archival documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR).

<sup>2</sup> If I may, I would like to insert a personal note here. The address to which this memo was sent in 1967 was Luisenstr. 56, the former Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that is now the intellectual home of the Berlin Graduate School of Social Sciences at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and where parts of this manuscript were written.

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In 1991, Adam Przeworski proposed one of the most elegant definitions of what a democratic system is: one in which “parties lose elections” (Przeworski 1991, 10). A democracy is a system of “ruled open-endedness, or organized uncertainty” (Przeworski 1991, 13). For him, the core element of democracies is that losers in the political game comply with the process and accept political outcomes because they trust that in the next round they can gain the upper hand.

In contrast to Przeworski’s famous dictum, autocratic regimes try to do all they can to avoid such ruled open-endedness. They try to organize certainty while knowing that their regimes are inherently vulnerable. They do not want to face the consequences that an electoral loss would imply. Instead, they cling to power and organize elections in such a way that they know the results *ex ante*. While in democracies the crystallizing moment is the minute before the electoral results are publicized, autocrats want to control the electoral results beforehand. German political theorist Ernst Fraenkel defines democratic societies therefore by the way a collective political will is formulated: Democracies are characterized by a general openness and pluralist competition between alternative ideas. The political will is therefore the “*a posteriori* result of a delicate process” (Fraenkel 1991, 300, own translation). The outcome of this process is not foreseeable in democracies. In contrast, autocratic rulers want *a priori* control. They want to minimize the threats of overthrow or loss of political authority. That is why the woman in the archival note was forced to cast her vote with an unsharpened pencil. That is why autocracies around the world manipulate their elections. They fear surprises.

Yet, it should be highlighted that autocracies do face trade-offs. While they want to organize certainty, they are nevertheless inherently uncertain. Andreas Schedler has emphasized this uncertainty in his eminent work (Schedler 2013). When autocracies such as the GDR and North Korea manipulate elections, they lose information. When they force a citizen to cast an empty vote, they do not know what she really thinks about her rulers. Elections are always barometers of discontent. If autocratic rulers curtail participation, they curtail information. In other words, if they create certainty at one level, then they simultaneously create uncertainty at another.

Some autocracies rely on long-term, planned, and institutionalized solutions, while others react in hectic and improvised ways, resulting in ad hoc arrangements. Yet, they all need to tackle the trade-offs in one way or another. In this book, I argue that the threats to the survival of autocratic regimes can emanate from three sides: from ordinary citizens, from the opposition, and from within the elite. They want to legitimize their rule to control the masses. They want to repress the

opposition so that they do not organize dissent. Meanwhile, autocratic regimes also want to maintain intra-elite cohesion and co-opt potential rivals. Legitimation, repression, and co-optation are the three key tasks of all autocratic regimes that this book tackles, both theoretically and empirically.

In the best of all worlds for autocratic regimes, they would be able to control all three open flanks. But they cannot. Usually, autocracies simply do not have the resources and power capacities to do so. It requires enormous material and symbolic capital to control the people, the opponents, and the elite simultaneously and sufficiently. Instead, existing resources need to be distributed across rivaling purposes, facing quasi-structural built-in trade-offs. If you repress popular discontent, you risk losing legitimacy. If you co-opt certain elites, you may alienate others. If you justify your rule by favoring certain societal groups, you will exclude others and breed opposition. The ultimate puzzle for autocrats, therefore, is how to harmonize conflicting goals given – economically speaking – a hard budget constraint.

This book contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it develops an innovative theory of autocratic rule. Based on an original synthesis of previous work – ranging from the 1940s to today – it proposes that autocratic regimes try to organize certainty by relying on either a logic of over-politicization or a logic of de-politicization. Second, it emphasizes configurational thinking and the complementarity between causal factors. It explicitly argues with combinations of factors and not with the relevance and weight of individual ones to explain regime stability. Third, it systematically tests the new theory against forty-five autocratic regimes in East Asia since the end of World War II. In the following, I will outline these points.

### **A Macroscopic Explanation**

In political science parlance, the combination of factors that stabilizes autocratic rule is a configuration, that is, an arrangement of components that work together in a specific way. The aim of this book is to develop a theoretical expectation of what these specific configurations could look like – and then to test them to see if they also hold empirically.

I argue that there are basically two distinct configurations that follow either an over-politicizing logic or a de-politicizing logic. While I discuss these two logics in more detail in the next section of this chapter, a first glimpse might help situate the reader. Generally speaking, I understand politicization as – literally – the process of turning private issues into public ones. Furthermore, I argue by employing the work of Carl

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Schmitt that politicization is the process of inflating a contrast, a societal cleavage, be it of ideological, religious, nationalistic, moral, cultural, economic, or ethnic colour, into an absolute distinction, constructing so a friend-foe distinction (Schmitt [1932] 2002). As such, the over-politicizing logic attempts to politicize even previously unpolitical issues and to create an internal foe of such magnitude that repression against this foe seems to be even justifiable. In contrast, the de-politicizing logic tries to do the opposite. It dampens political contestation and pulls public issues into an uncontested realm. While the former logic attempts to activate and mobilize the people, the latter passivates the people, dampens their political ambitions, and seeks to turn them into apathetic followers. While the former relies most often on ideational overcharging of a societal distinction, the de-politicizing logic, in turn, focuses on the regime’s social or economic performance, images of law and order, internal security, and material well-being to keep the people satisfied with the regime’s output. These differences in legitimating modi are coupled with the use of different forms of repression as well as different forms of elite co-optation that I spell out later. Yet, what is important to note here is that these configurations are characterized by an inherent complementarity, a certain fit of factors to one another. They follow a distinct but internally reinforcing logic. It is in conjunction – and not in isolation – that these factors form specific configurations that offset potential dangers and maintain autocratic regime stability over a longer period of time.

The theoretical framework presented here places much emphasis on scholarly work put forward as early as the 1940s and 1950s, at what is sometimes called the beginning of modern political science. Yet, it is simultaneously embedded in the recent renaissance of comparative authoritarianism that we observed in the past two decades. Therefore, it can be best understood as a synthesis of classic writings and contemporary academic insights.

In the recent revival of comparative authoritarianism, we have learned a lot about the dynamics of autocratic rule. We know today much more about the inner workings of autocratic regimes than we did twenty years ago. Prominent works have highlighted the role of regime type on the persistence of autocracies. Barbara Geddes and her colleagues have shown that due to differing incentive structures, one-party regimes last longer than personalist and military regimes (Geddes 1999; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; 2018). This finding has been confirmed and refined by complementary work (Dimitrov 2013; Hadenius and Teorell 2007; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). We have also observed a strong theoretical focus on the institutional power structure of autocratic regimes and on how *prima facie* democratic institutions like parties, parliaments,

elections, and courts contribute to the stability of autocratic rule (Boix and Svobik 2013; Gandhi 2008; Ginsburg and Moustafa 2008; Knutsen, Nygard, and Wig 2017; Magaloni 2006; Morgenbesser 2016; Schedler 2013; Slater 2010b; Smith 2005; Svobik 2012).

What was once a paradox is today a well-accepted empirical fact that has been shown for spatiotemporally diverse cases: seemingly democratic institutions matter for autocracies! Besides this focus on institutions, it has been demonstrated that autocracies rely on output and performance as much as their democratic counterparts do (Chandra and Rudra 2015; Miller 2015; Roller 2013; Schmidt 2013; Tanneberg, Stefes, and Merkel 2013). On an international level, the role of coercive instruments like sanctions (Escribà-Folch 2012; Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Marinov 2005), international administrations and linkages (Tansey 2009; Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2016), and more subtle diffusion processes across countries (Bank 2017; Hanson and Kopstein 2005; Koesel and Bunce 2013; Weyland 2017) have been thoroughly analyzed. These important works have all substantially increased our understanding of the inner mechanisms of autocratic rule.

Comparative authoritarianism has been a field with an enormous time lag. For decades, research on comparative authoritarianism has suffered from a severe data shortage. Only in past years have we witnessed unparalleled data collection efforts that have enabled new analytical insights. However, I am concerned that empirical advancement has outpaced our theoretical and conceptual improvement. Giovanni Sartori cautioned that the opposite should be the case: “the progress of quantification should lag – in whatever discipline – behind its qualitative and conceptual progress” (Sartori 1970, 1038). Today, we find ourselves in a situation in which we are often tempted to use only those quantifiable measures of observable events and institutions that are currently readily available for our concept building. But, as we are reminded, concept building is not a decision by fiat and not a mere “prelude to serious research” (Schedler 2011, 370). It is an integral part of the research cycle. Shaky concepts lead to shaky theories. Babylonian confusion over (thick and thin) concepts is of course not exclusive to the study of comparative authoritarianism. However, I argue that we have reached a point in the field where we should consolidate our conceptual and theoretical knowledge.

In general, helpful scholarly books can be distinguished between prospective and retrospective ones. While the former aims to explore new terrain, identifies innovative trends and pathways, and pioneers research, the latter aims more at pausing and taking stock of our fragmented current knowledge, synthesizing past and current work in order to engage in theory building and to offer a fresh look at what we know about a certain

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subject. I think it is fair to say that this book is rather devoted to the latter approach. A major motivation to write this book has been to renew scholarly interest in the classic work on totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. The book tries so to consolidate our knowledge and – by being firmly anchored in the research inventory of nondemocratic rule – aspires to point to future research directions from these consolidated grounds.

And indeed, it is remarkable that despite the huge empirical progress that the field has made in the past twenty years, the central *theoretical* works are still the writings of Juan Linz, Guillermo O’Donnell, and Amos Perlmutter of the 1970s and 1980s, or even German exile scholars like Carl Joachim Friedrich and Hannah Arendt of some two or three decades earlier (Arendt [1951] 1966; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956; Linz 1964; 1975; O’Donnell 1979; Perlmutter 1981). Of course, the tendency toward grand theorizing with broad reach was more “fashionable” during earlier times. Since then, Comparative Politics has made a general empirical turn. Given the new data abundance that scholars have created since the late 1990s, this empirical turn is a long awaited one. It provides not only fresh answers but also generalizable ones. Viewed from today, the general theoretical (and empirical) explorations of the previously mentioned scholars sometimes seem like a reminiscence of the past. However, to recall the insights of these eminent thinkers and their grand theorizing, connecting them to the most recent empirical studies, and so attempting to harmonize a fragmented field is the major concern of this book.

The book is particularly inspired by Linz’s seminal work and follows in his footsteps (1964; 1975; 1977). His work is mostly read as a typology to distinguish between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Totalitarian regimes are characterized by three features: (1) a monistic power center, (2) an ideology, and (3) societal mobilization. In contrast, authoritarian regimes are “political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism; without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinct mentalities); without intensive nor extensive political mobilization ..., and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits, but actually predictable ones” (Linz 1964, 297).

I follow Linz’s macro-theoretical approach but read his work not only as a typology. Instead, I understand his work as a hybrid between typologies and explanations. A close reading reveals that he develops his typology with a steady focus on the question of stability. As such, his work does not only follow the ordering function of typologies (Collier, Laporte, and Seawright 2008; Lazarsfeld 1992) but has in mind what Colin Elman (2005) called decades later an “explanatory typology.” When formulating

the theoretical expectations of the book, it was important for me to make explicit its explanatory purpose. This book presents a comprehensive and novel theoretical framework that should develop explanatory power for all subtypes of autocratic regimes. Instead of focusing on the power architecture or concrete actors, it emphasizes general structures and functions that all autocratic regimes share. It argues that all autocratic systems need to fulfill the key tasks of legitimation, repression, and co-optation to maintain stability.<sup>3</sup> These “three pillars” (Gerschewski 2013; Gerschewski et al. 2013) make autocracies of various subtypes not only comparable but also explain their stability over the long run.<sup>4</sup>

As such, the book can be read as an update to what Linz proposed four decades ago. Yet, an original theoretical synthesis should always go beyond what has been written before. This book does so in three ways. First, it deviates from Linz’s original dimensions and proposes new ones. Instead of highlighting monism vs. limited pluralism, ideologies vs. mentalities, and mobilization vs. no mobilization as Linz (1975) previously did, I refer to different forms of legitimation, repression, and co-optation. Second, the theoretical framework presented here is not only meant as a typology; it is also designed to explicitly provide explanatory power. I develop concrete theoretical expectations of why autocratic rule remains stable – and not “only” what autocratic rule looks like. Third, the book carves out two specific ruling logics, over-politicization and de-politicization, that explain the stability of autocratic rule and that – as will be shown later – have the potential to replace the old distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. This book is so both a continuation and a significant further development of Linz’s work in light of newer waves of research. Yet, it shares Linz’s macro-theoretical

<sup>3</sup> To some extent, it could be argued that legitimation, repression, and co-optation are key functions of all types of political systems. They are not restricted to autocracies but may apply to democracies as well. I am sympathetic to this line of reasoning. Democracies must also relate to the people, the opposition, and the elite. These are the three key groups in democracies as well and might turn into existential threats. A democracy might so become a vulgarized, populist-majoritarianist ochlocracy (people), might turn into a too polarized pluralistic society (opposition), or a kleptocratic corrupt nepotism (elite). While historical examples abound, a more systematic theorization would be required. Moreover, different concepts might be employed to explain the stability of democratic regimes. In particular, repression might be changed into compulsion or coercion and the use of the Weberian notion of the (legitimate) state monopoly of use of force. But, of course, as Loewenstein (1937) initially formulated and Capocchia (2005) further developed, “militant democracies” do fight against existential threats by antisystem actors as well.

<sup>4</sup> Let me add that I assume causal asymmetry here. This means that I do not expect that the absence of (a combination of) factors that explain stability leads automatically to its reverse outcome, that is, instability.



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Table I.1 *Connecting to and going beyond Linz’s work*

	Linz’s Classical Distinction	The Proposed Distinction
Typological Dimensions/ “Theory Frames”	1. Monism vs. limited pluralism 2. Ideology vs. mentality 3. Mobilization vs. no mobilization	A configuration of 1. forms of legitimation 2. forms of repression 3. forms of co-optation
Resulting Types/ Ruling Logics	Totalitarian vs. authoritarian regimes	Over-politicizing vs. de-politicizing logic
Research Aims	- Typology of political regimes - Implicit explanatory aim	- Typology of political regime logics - Explicit explanatory aim

perspective and his commitment to summarizing a wealth of insights into one coherent framework. Table I.1 provides an overview.

In order to develop explanatory power, the concepts of legitimation, repression, and co-optation go beyond “mere” typological dimensions. Instead, I put a lot of emphasis on careful concept-building and try to do justice to the rich history and substance of these concepts. In this light, I upgrade these concepts and consider them as partial “theory frames” (Rueschemeyer 2009, 2).<sup>5</sup> Theory frames should represent repositories of previous studies and should “absorb earlier research results” (Rueschemeyer 2009, 15) to consolidate and unify our current knowledge. The theory frames are understood as partial building blocks that inform definitions, conceptualizations, and operationalizations but also spell out concrete working mechanisms and guide theoretical expectations. As such, the theory frames that are proposed here are geared toward generalizations and represent in themselves an “abstraction separated from a concrete case” (Alexander 1987, 2). In line with the previously stated, retrospective ambition of the book, the hope is that these individual theory frames provide an important step from “information about many facts (*polymathia*)” to “well-ordered knowledge (*episteme*)” (Rueschemeyer 2009, 4). Based on these building blocks, the second step

<sup>5</sup> As some familiar with Rueschemeyer’s (2009) work will notice, I deviate from his idea of theory frames in one important aspect. He uses theory frames more in the sense of general social theory, while I confine them to a specific domain, the comparative study of political regimes. Rueschemeyer structures his work along explanations that are based on actors’ knowledge, norms, preferences, emotions, as well as aggregate explanations based on institutions, social identities, and cultural and other macro-contexts. Yet, I find it suitable to borrow his term as his work stresses the portability of theory frames; an emphasis on their usability for empirical research; and, particularly, an outspoken dedication to synthesizing previous work.

in theory-building consists of productively combining the partial frames into one coherent theoretical edifice. By doing so, I put forward the conjunctural nature of the argument. The book proposes so a new modular theory of autocratic regime stability. It adopts a macro-theoretical approach written in a Linzian spirit.

In the following section, I introduce the three partial theory frames and indicate how and why they jointly form specific configurations.

### **The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule**

The modular theory that I propose here consists of three components that – put together – should explain autocratic regime stability. The three components correspond to the three major sources of autocratic regimes' vulnerability. They are structural in nature and relate to the main function of legitimating autocratic rule, repressing the opposition, and co-opting potential rivals. In the following, I briefly identify the main arguments that stand behind these components. Based on this discussion, I proceed to how these components jointly form configurations that follow either an over-politicizing logic or a de-politicizing logic.

#### *The Three Partial Theory Frames*

When crafting the first partial theory frame for explaining autocratic stability, legitimation, the old and almost old-fashioned works on totalitarian regimes are crucial. The role that ideologies play in these regimes cannot be underestimated. For Arendt's socio-philosophical attempt to understand the nature of totalitarianism, ideology was nothing less than essential (Arendt [1951] 1966). For Friedrich and Brzezinski, who aimed at a more structuralist explanation, ideology was the first (and arguably the most important) point in their "six-point catalogue" that summarized the main features of totalitarian rule (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956). Relatedly, an almost forgotten approach comparing these ideologies to political religions deepens an understanding of why and how political ideologies work and can cultivate a following among the people (Aron 1970; Gentile 2005; Maier 2007; Voegelin [1938] 1996).

Despite the passage of time, the overarching questions remain the same today: How do autocratic leaders justify their grip on power? And, how do they generate a following among the ordinary people? To legitimize political rule, autocrats have been using and still use a wide variety of political ideologies, including ethnic and religious claims, and often manipulate collective memory by instrumentalizing historical narratives such as the struggle for independence against colonialism and revolutionary