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The Puzzle of Electoral Authoritarian Competition

> No party which limits its membership to a clique can ever free itself from fear of overthrow from those it has excluded.
>
> —Julius Nyerere (*Freedom and Socialism,* 1968)

Autocracies now regularly hold multiparty elections that do not live up to commonly held democratic standards. Persistent exclusion, censorship, fraud, and at times violence push many regimes into what is increasingly identified as *electoral authoritarianism* (Schedler 2006a, 2013). This major global development has opened up a whole new set of fascinating questions into the dynamics and endurance of authoritarian rule. What benefits do elections bring autocrats? Under what conditions do elections sustain rather than undermine authoritarian regimes? Do electoral authoritarian regimes sow the seeds of democratization? While these questions largely address whether electoral autocracies are likely to withstand elections, absent is a clearer account of how such regimes actually compete in them. Indeed, two electoral authoritarian regimes might endure for similar periods of time, but differ greatly in terms of how much popular support they can muster at the ballot box and what degree of manipulation they employ. These differences in how autocrats compete have not been properly understood, but in fact inform us greatly about how contemporary authoritarianism functions.

In this book I argue that how autocrats compete does not depend primarily on their manipulative skills or cleverness, but rather on the relationships they foster over time with elites, citizens, and external actors. With an eye toward the African experience, I contend that electoral authoritarian competition is influenced primarily by the ability of

regimes to sustain ruling institutions that foster stable and credible relationships with supporters, and secondarily by the postures of international actors toward democratic norms. It is an argument derived from a specific subset of African cases, and rooted in the role of historical legacy and variation in the investments authoritarians make in their formal ruling institutions, namely parties. It is also an argument that clarifies under what conditions and how external actors influence electoral authoritarian competition.

The following examples illustrate what I mean by differences in electoral authoritarian competition. In Tanzania, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) and its predecessor the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) have governed the country since independence as a single-party regime. After elections were restored in 1995, CCM sailed to easy victories, at times winning upwards of 80 percent of the vote. Notably, it contested elections with relative ease. Election observers and opposition parties have noted occasional polling irregularities like missing ballots, instances of intimidation, and media bias. Likewise, the election management body and voter registration process has repeatedly come under scrutiny. However, while Tanzanian elections are not clearly democratic, they are far from the stereotype of sham elections seen elsewhere. On the mainland, fraud is not pervasive, and the opposition is not subject to draconian measures like blanket arrests or excessive state violence. This was true even in 2010 and 2015, when the regime appeared vulnerable for the first time in a decade to new opposition challengers, yet still maintained a firm grip on the legislature and won 63 and 58 percent of the presidential vote respectively. In Tanzania, elections are relatively open if one-sided affairs.

This contrasts with the multiparty experience elsewhere in Africa. Across the continent, Cameroon also transitioned to elections in 1992 after a prolonged period of single-party rule. As in Tanzania, the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) has, in some form or another, led the country since independence. However, in this case multiparty elections clearly leveled a more serious challenge. In 1992, the CPDM temporarily lost its legislative majority, and sitting president Paul Biya could only draw victory with a simple plurality of voters. At the same time observers noted severe flaws in the electoral process, including blatant ballot stuffing, harsh media restrictions, and significant state violence. These serious issues with electoral integrity persisted in subsequent elections, but also appeared to pay off. By 2008 Biya had abolished term limits, and in 2011 he won a controversial fourth term with 78 percent of the vote. Two years later the CPDM won 85 percent of the

legislative seats. Harsh manipulation has therefore consistently sustained the regime's dominating electoral performances.

Such manipulation is not, however, always a successful strategy. Just to the north of Tanzania the Kenyan African National Union (KANU) likewise made the transition from single-party rule to multiparty elections in the early 1990s. Once again, elections were comparatively more challenging, and in 1992 KANU only won 53 percent of the legislative seats while president Daniel arap Moi eked by with just 37 percent of the presidential vote. As in Cameroon, starker levels of repression accompanied elections that ranged from blatant electoral fraud, manipulation of Kenya's money supply, and shocking ethnic violence that killed and displaced thousands. However, while manipulation and violence persisted during the 1997 election, the outcome was once again very close. By 2002, the electoral process had improved slightly, but the regime could still not draw substantial electoral support and dramatically lost to an opposition coalition. Manipulation only helped KANU win razor-thin victories, but it did not secure stronger vote shares.

While all three of these cases are considered examples of electoral authoritarianism, their divergent response to the challenge of multiparty elections raises some important questions. When is an electoral authoritarian regime likely to use more manipulation to win elections? When is manipulation likely to be a successful strategy and ensure substantial vote share? If a regime can mobilize significant voter support with comparatively less manipulation, what does that tell us about the sources of authoritarian resilience and durability? Indeed, by giving more attention to the specific manner in which autocracies compete in elections, and not just simply whether they win them or not, we must also appreciate the diverse resources and capabilities autocrats bring with them to the electoral arena, as well as their relative ability to deploy those tools.

For these three cases, which are central to this book's arguments, legacies of authoritarian institution building are a critical factor. Tanzania's regime was armed with what I call a *credible ruling party*. It is a party that emerged from a specific historical juncture, but developed features that stabilized how elites and voters engaged with the regime, and consequently helped secure longer-term and more enduring commitments from them. This allowed Tanzania to contest elections with stronger assurances of support *prior* to the election, and therefore to compete with less overt manipulation. Cameroon and Kenya lacked such credible institutions, and therefore faced much higher levels of elite and voter discord prior to elections. Absent an institutional platform to interact with

supporters, these regimes had to deploy harsher manipulation and find ways to coopt or coerce opponents. However, the utility of this manipulative strategy, particularly as it plays out in Africa, is constrained by international actors. The direction of *international patronage* determined the range of tools an autocrat could employ, and whether this translated electorally. In Kenya, international patronage tilted toward democracy, while in Cameroon it supported autocracy.

In the next sections of this introductory chapter I discuss the question of electoral authoritarian competition in broader terms, and in the African context specifically. I overview some of the major approaches to studying electoral authoritarian politics, and make an argument for research that looks beyond the question of regime survival, but rather approaches the specific question of electoral authoritarian competition with contextually driven and case-based analysis. I outline in more detail my own explanation and discuss how this argument contributes to the literature on authoritarian institution building and provides insights into the comparative resilience of authoritarian regimes. Finally, I discuss the book's research strategy and specify how it is situated in current thinking about qualitative and case-study methods.

DEFINING THE PUZZLE OF ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN COMPETITION

Electoral authoritarianism has become the modal form of nondemocratic politics in the post–Cold War era. For a significant period of time regimes that combined elements of democratic and autocratic practice merited added adjectives to their democratic credentials. Regimes were often categorized as "semi-democratic," "new democracies," "illiberal democracies," or more broadly merely as "hybrid."[1] To claim that these perspectives were completely teleological or simply suffered from a "fallacy of electoralism" is an overstatement (Karl 1990). Nonetheless, in previous work there was a much deeper concern with how remnants of authoritarianism were holding democratic progress back, rather than how little regimes had changed or how elections (and other hybrid institutions) actually benefitted autocrats. Consequently, the transition to the study of electoral authoritarianism reflects both the end of a paradigmatic way

[1] Space precludes a full listing of this early wave of literature, but see the work in Collier and Levitsky (1997), Zakaria (1997), Rose and Shin (2001), Brumberg (2002), and Ottaway (2003).

of thinking about regime trajectories, and the inauguration of a new set of research questions into the study of contemporary authoritarianism (Carothers 2002).

Of course elections under authoritarian conditions are not new phenomena, and the question remains whether electoral authoritarianism reflects a new regime type rather than just "Babel in democratization studies" (Armony and Schamis 2005). For instance, in Juan Linz's classic work on authoritarianism he distinguished limited pluralism and popular mobilization as defining features of autocracy (2000). Likewise, studies of single-party African states in the 1960s and 1970s often emphasized the role of controlled and uncompetitive elections as tools of authoritarian survival.[2] The literature on transitions from authoritarianism highlighted the role of elections in the process of regime liberalization. While elections were often restored in a very narrow sense – either locally or solely for legislatures – they laid the groundwork for further strides toward democratic transition (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986). But, it was not until the end of the Cold War that regular, contested, and unfair elections became a reality across such a broad swathe of previously authoritarian countries (Roessler and Howard 2009). In many ways multiparty elections have become a *fait accompli* of the modern era.

But authoritarian elections, in the words of Andreas Schedler, are also a "Janus-faced" affair (2013). Elections do more than just reveal regime weaknesses, and they are not simply façade events or window dressings to appease international donors. At times autocrats actually appear to derive strength from elections, and are able to mobilize diverse resources that help them compete (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). On the other hand, elections might expose and exacerbate critical vulnerabilities that can be an autocrat's ultimate undoing. Indeed, autocrats often play a two-leveled game, whereby manipulation of the electoral process to ensure victory leads to unforeseen costs elsewhere. Step too far and an authoritarian regime risks signaling weakness rather than strength. Pull back too much, and new opposition parties might take advantage of the more even playing field. Put more succinctly, multiparty elections have a varied and not necessarily one-sided impact on authoritarian politics.

Many studies address this ambiguity by distinguishing between electoral authoritarian outcomes that are "competitive" rather than "hegemonic."

[2] The early studies of single-party regimes in the developing world often addressed the role of elections. See for example, Zolberg (1966), Morgenthau (1967), Coleman and Rosberg (1970), and Collier (1982). The most comprehensive early account of authoritarian elections can be found in Hermet, Rouquie, and Rose (1978).

The language used is notoriously unclear, but it is a sincere attempt to convey valid information about the phenomenon.[3] A key point of debate is over the connotation of the term "competitive." In some studies, competitive refers to the actual process of contestation, or the rules and restrictions that shape whether voters can translate their preferences into actual outcomes (Levitsky and Way 2010). According to this understanding, competitive regimes are more open and less manipulative than hegemonic regimes. On the other hand, competitive can refer to the electoral outcome, or the capacity of participants to effectively mobilize voters (Roessler and Howard 2009; Schedler 2013). This is often captured in measures of vote-share or regime longevity. In competitive regimes electoral competition is more meaningful, while hegemonic regimes correspond more with Giovanni Sartori's understanding of the term: the perception that alternation is near impossible (Sartori 1976). To borrow a sport's analogy, competition can signify the rules of the game or the player's athletic abilities.

In part because of this ambiguity, much of the scholarship does not appreciate the full range of outcomes by which electoral authoritarianism can differ. Take for example perhaps the most important volume on the subject in the past decade, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's *Competitive Authoritarianism* (2010). Levitsky and Way make a distinction between "stable" and "unstable" competitive authoritarianism. Stable authoritarianism refers to when an incumbent autocrat has not yet lost power at the ballot box, while an unstable regime is one that has succumbed to electoral turnover but still falls short of a democracy. Since Tanzania and Cameroon have survived elections for similar periods of time, by Levitsky and Way's definition both are considered cases of stable electoral authoritarianism even though they have contested elections by very different means in terms of processes and outcomes.

Other studies of electoral authoritarianism similarly focus on regime survival, and treat the ambiguous question of competition as the independent rather than the dependent variable. For instance, Roessler and Howard find that competitive authoritarian regimes are ephemeral and tend to tip toward minimal democracy or authoritarian retrenchment

[3] For instance, Beatriz Magaloni (2006) and Kenneth Greene (2007) use the terms "hegemonic" and "dominant" interchangeably to connote long-lasting electoral authoritarian regimes in Mexico. Aili Mari Tripp distinguishes between "semi-democratic" and "semi-authoritarian" regimes (2010). Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell use the categories "dominant party multiparty" and "pure limited multiparty" to make similar distinctions (2007). Within the African context Nicolas van de Walle refers to "status quo" regimes versus "contested autocracies" (2002).

(2009). Jason Brownlee argues that competitive regimes are more likely than hegemonic regimes to be followed by democracy (2009). Likewise, Andreas Schedler shows that competitive regimes are more sensitive to factors like public protest (2013). In each of these cited examples the term competitive invokes electoral outcomes, not the process of contestation or the rules of the game. There is little discussion of why some regimes dominate election outcomes to begin with, or why electoral dominance might be sustained with more or less manipulation of the electoral process.[4]

Thinking of competition as a multi-dimensional concept is more accurate empirically and theoretically. Undoubtedly there is a relationship between uncompetitive processes of contestation and uncompetitive electoral outcomes. Indeed, there is scholarship that suggests that electoral violence, which makes the electoral process less competitive, is primarily a reaction to perceptions of electoral weakness (Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski 2014). By contrast, one can imagine that when regimes are able to secure substantial vote share this reflects stability, and therefore reduces the need for heavy manipulation. But, as this book will demonstrate the empirical record is actually quite mixed. Only at times is heavy manipulation a losing strategy, and dwindling electoral prospects do not always inevitably lead to repression. For instance, prior to its defeat in Ghana, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) accepted more open contestation even as it was seriously challenged at the polls. Nor are all dominating regimes less coercive, as seen most clearly in the contrast between Tanzania and Cameroon.

But more importantly, differences in electoral competition reflect variation in the underlying features that sustain regimes. When an autocrat can contest and dominate elections with relatively less manipulation, this signals a fundamentally different kind of authoritarian regime than one that must manipulate heavily to achieve similar electoral results. I claim that in Tanzania this kind of electoral authoritarian outcome is possible because the regime can tap into a wider spectrum of benefits offered by ruling parties. By contrast, if a regime needs to manipulate heavily to generate vote-share, this reflects a vulnerability that might be rooted in the absence of institutional guarantees of support, or other discriminating factors. As discussed in the cases of Cameroon and Kenya, the longer-term success of more repressive electoral authoritarianism depended on whether an international actor lent a helping hand or kept regimes under

[4] The focus on authoritarian survival versus breakdown also permeates the literature on authoritarian institutions. See Gandhi (2008) and Geddes (1999).

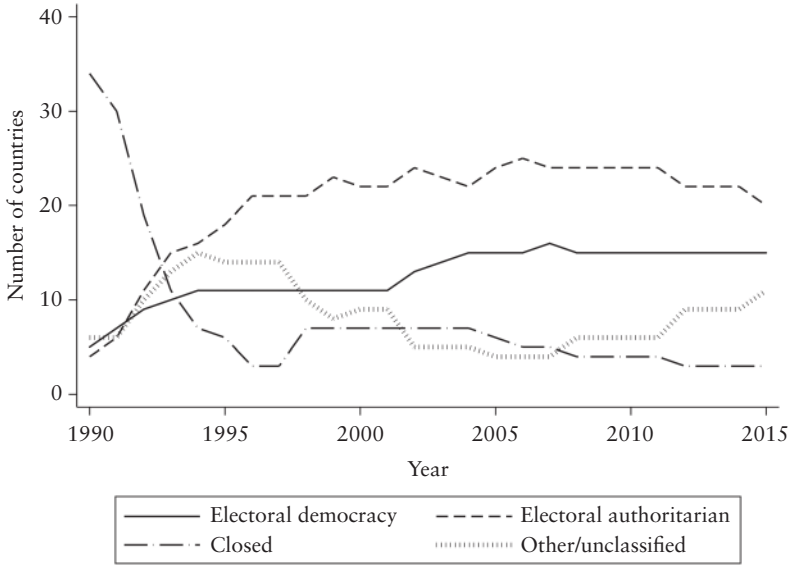

FIGURE 1.1. *Growth in African electoral authoritarian regimes (1990–2016)*
Note: Countries are considered electoral authoritarian if they hold at least two consecutive and contested elections for national executives and legislatures, and their Freedom House Political Rights score in the year prior was above 2 and their Polity IV score was below 7. A regime is democratic if their Freedom House score was below 3 or their Polity IV score was above 6. A regime is closed if it does not hold multiparty elections, and is other/unclassified if it is in a state of conflict or has not held two consecutive elections.
Sources: Freedom House (Various), Polity IV (Various)

more duress. But, only by focusing on a multifaceted notion of competition can we observe this underlying variation.

The study of electoral authoritarianism competition is particularly relevant for the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Since 1990 there has been a dramatic growth in this regime type, and notable divergence in patterns of electoral contestation. While in 1990 there were only four African countries that held regular multiparty elections – Botswana, Mauritius, Senegal, and Zimbabwe – by decade's end there were only a handful of countries that did not. Yet, while this transition to multiparty elections was meaningful in many important ways, as the new era unfolded it became evident that African party systems were evolving in diverse and often nondemocratic ways. Some literature assessed the "puzzle" of Africa's new multiparty politics through the lens of party system institutionalization (Kuenzi and Lambright 2001, 2005; Manning

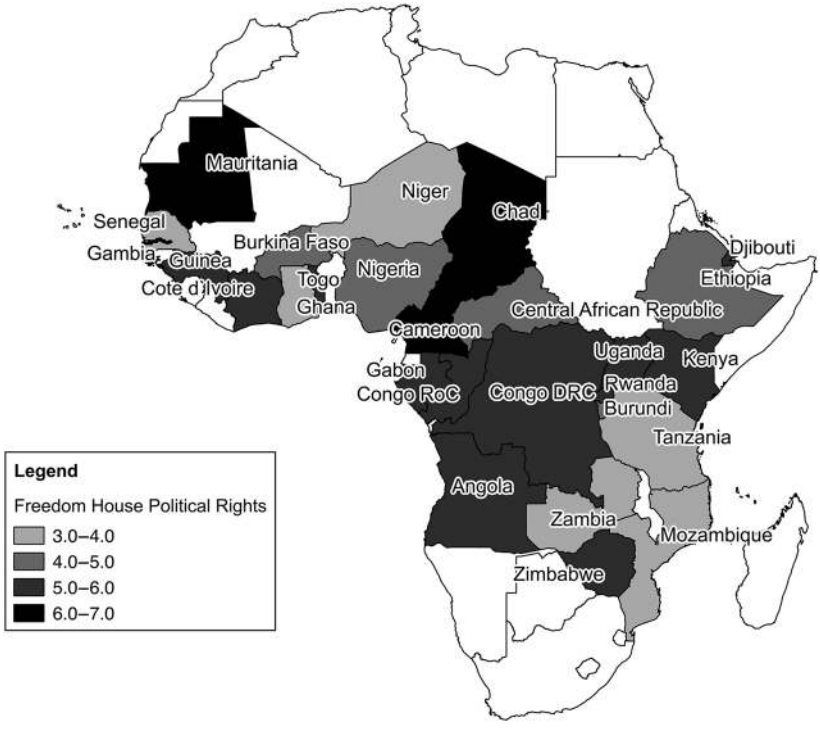

FIGURE 1.2. *Cross-national variation in political rights in African electoral authoritarian regimes (1990–2016)*
Information on each specific country can be found in Appendix A.
Source: Freedom House (Various)

2005; Mozaffar and Scarrit 2005). Recently, there has been more systematic analysis of African electoral regimes through the distinct language of electoral authoritarianism (Lynch and Crawford 2011; Bogaards 2013). Figure 1.1 summarizes this trend by depicting the growth in African electoral authoritarianism between 1990 and 2015.

Within the population of African electoral authoritarianism there are considerable differences. Figure 1.2 maps the average Freedom House Political Rights score in all African electoral authoritarian regimes identified between 1990 and 2016. While a fuller range of manipulative options is discussed in Chapter 3, the Political Rights score provides a useful initial proxy that captures the degree to which the electoral process is competitive and more open contestation is tolerated. There is clearly a spectrum of restrictions on political activity that ranges from more repressive conditions in Cameroon, Chad, and Mauritania, to more tolerable

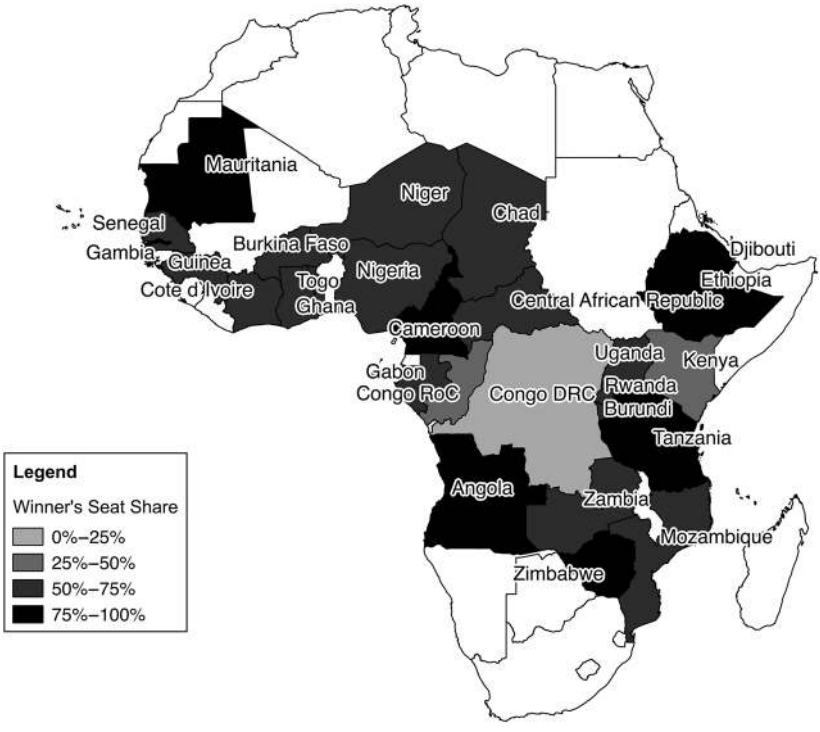

FIGURE 1.3. *Cross-national variation in incumbent seat share in African electoral authoritarian regimes (1990–2016)*
Information on each specific country can be found in Appendix A.
Source: African Elections Database (Various)

environments in Mozambique, Senegal, and Tanzania. Figure 1.3 looks at the average legislative seat share in African electoral authoritarian regimes, which provides a comparable measure across presidential and parliamentary systems of the competitiveness of outcomes. Once again, there is variation in the ability of incumbents to generate strong and dominating vote shares. Looking at these two measures simultaneously, we get a much more nuanced view of African electoral authoritarian competition.

The purpose of this book is to better explicate this diversity of electoral authoritarian experience. I define electoral authoritarian competition as a combination of the extent and severity of restrictions on free competition, and the ability of incumbents to generate large vote shares. Electoral authoritarianism in Tanzania combines overwhelming vote shares (an uncompetitive outcome) with lower degrees of manipulation (a competitive process). This makes it a fairly odd specimen that I term a *tolerant*