1

Introduction

"The simplest political system is that which depends on one individual.
It is also the least stable."
Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968, 18)

1.1 TWO PUZZLES ABOUT AUTHORITARIAN INSTITUTIONS

As newly independent states, Tanzania and Guinea seemed to be on the same trajectory of durable authoritarian rule. Tanzania, under the founding presidency of Julius Nyerere, was a single-party state, led by the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) party. TANU politicians filled the National Assembly, which met on a regular basis. Presidential and legislative elections have been held every five years, like clockwork since 1965, as stated in the constitution.

This stability has lasted for decades. Nyerere, the first postindependence leader, retired after the 1985 presidential elections. Power was swiftly handed over to Nyerere's handpicked successor, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, and the ruling party continued to control over the government. The same regime remains in power today. The ruling TANU/CCM party continues to dominate Tanzanian politics[1] – even surviving the introduction of multiparty elections in 1995. Since independence, the country has undergone four peaceful leadership transitions and is one of the longest reigning autocracies in Africa.

Like Tanzania, Guinea had a ruling party, legislature, and regularly held elections as a newly independent state. Under the founding presidency of Ahmed Sekou Toure, Guinea was a single-party regime, led by

[1] TANU was renamed Chama Cha Mapindui (CCM) in 1977, following the merger of Tanzania and Zanzibar, although the party remained largely the same.

the Parti democratique de Guinee (PDG) party. PDG politicians filled the National Assembly, which conducted two regular sessions every year. Presidential elections were held regularly in 1961, 1968, 1974, and 1982, and National Assembly elections were held in 1963, 1968, 1974, and 1980, as stated in the constitution.

Yet these institutions did not provide long-term stability in Guinea. In 1984, Sekou Toure died of a heart attack after being airlifted to Cleveland, Ohio for emergency heart surgery while on a trip to Saudi Arabia. Before succession plans could be finalized, the military seized power in a coup d'état and the leader of the coup, Colonel Lansana Conte, claimed the presidency. The PDG was immediately disbanded, the National Assembly was dissolved, and the constitution was abolished. In short, the regime died with its leader.

Why did regime outcomes in Tanzania and Guinea diverge so drastically? Why was the authoritarian system in Guinea unable to survive the death of the leader, even with a full set of nominally democratic institutions in place? Sekou Toure had a ruling party, a legislature, and regularly held elections. He was even a socialist who aimed to replicate the Soviet state. Nonetheless, the regime fell in Guinea, and these institutions themselves were swiftly wiped out after the death of the leader.

These vignettes raise the first puzzle of the book: what explains differences in authoritarian regime outcomes, if not differences in quasi-democratic institutions?

One possible consideration is that we need to look beyond the most common types of quasi-democratic institutions – such as parties and legislatures, which are quite prevalent across authoritarian regimes – and consider more subtle forms of variation. Indeed, Guinea and Tanzania *did* differ in one important institution: adoption of executive constraints.

Since independence, presidents in Tanzania have had a number of institutional constraints on their authority. During the tenure of the founding president Nyerere, term limits and detailed leadership succession procedures became enshrined in the constitution, and these rules remain in place today. According to the constitution, presidents are limited to two terms in office (Article 40), and in the case of the president's death or incapacitation, the vice president is the designated successor (Article 37). The presidential cabinet, which is filled with TANU party elites, exists as a genuine power-sharing organization rather than a hallow endorsement device. Since independence, all presidents have maintained fully functional cabinets, and all key cabinet positions, such as the vice presidency and defense ministry, have been appointed to elites on a regular basis. Critically, appointments for the position of vice president

are infrequently shuffled, which endorses an elite in this position as a clear and stable successor in accordance with constitutional rules regarding succession.

By contrast, Sekou Toure faced very few constraints on his presidential authority. The constitution of Guinea did not specify clear succession procedures, promoting the image that Sekou Toure was an irreplaceable leader, nor did it include term limits.[2] Within the presidential cabinet, Sekou Toure maintained clear dominance. The roles of prime minister and defense minister were eliminated over half the time he was in office. When a defense minister was appointed, elites who filled this position were shuffled frequently. In fact, the average tenure of this appointment under Sekou Toure was under three years.

Moreover, although the regime in Guinea under Sekou Toure had a ruling party, legislature, elections, and a constitution, these institutions did not function to tie the leader's hands. In fact, Sekou Toure exploited these institutions to amplify his own power. The ruling party, the PDG, was used primarily as a mouthpiece to promote the leader's own ideology and policies, rather than as a forum for elite power sharing (Adamolekun 1976; Camara 2005). Although the National Assembly of Guinea met regularly twice a year, its only formal function was to endorse legislation and budgetary requests that were put forth by Sekou Toure. As described by Jackson and Rosberg (1982): "Most laws originate simply and swiftly in the decrees and edicts of the ruler. As the supreme authority in the land, not only do his opinions prevail over all others, but they 'become laws as they are uttered'" (212). In this case, institutions clearly did not constrain the leader.

In sum, although Tanzania and Guinea had similar looking parties and legislatures on the surface, these two cases had very different patterns of executive constraints that shaped the power of the president.

This raises a second puzzle of the book: why do some authoritarian rulers adopt executive constraints while others do not?

This book will offer new insights on both of these puzzles. The primary thesis of this study is that autocratic regime institutionalization – the creation of rules and procedures that tie the leader's hands by empowering other elites – is key to understanding patterns of regime durability in dictatorships. Concrete examples of such measures include constitutional rules specifying the leadership succession order or term limits, in addition to the appointment of elites to high-ranking cabinet positions, such as the vice presidency. I will demonstrate that these institutions provide explicit

[2] In fact, the constitution stated explicitly that the president may be reelected without mention of term restrictions.

constraints on executive power by providing high-level state access to other elites, therefore empowering them with resources and their own independent influence.

This argument stands in contrast with the conventional wisdom that nominally democratic institutions, such as parties, legislatures, or elections, drive authoritarian stability. A key assumption in much existing scholarship is that these institutions generally have the organizational capacity to constrain leaders and facilitate elite power sharing. As this chapter will show, parties and legislatures have become extremely commonplace in dictatorships, yet most are organizationally weak and overly reliant on the influence of particular leaders. Rather than assuming that the existence of parties or legislatures can effectively constrain leaders, this book examines the creation of explicit executive constraints within constitutions and power-sharing appointments in presidential cabinets. While it is certainly true that not all autocratic institutions are merely instances of window dressing, it is also important to recognize that not all institutions successfully constrain leaders.

Importantly, this book addresses the key question of how certain types of institutions constrain leaders. After all, a leader who can create an institution can also disassemble it as well. How do institutions have any bite in dictatorships? I argue that institutions can credibly constrain leaders only when they change the underlying distribution of power between leaders and elites. When an elite is appointed to a key cabinet position, such as vice president or the minister of defense, he is given access to power and resources that allow him to consolidate his own base of support. The appointment of elites to these key cabinet positions creates a focal point around these individuals and identifies them as credible challengers to the incumbent. Over time, the delegation of authority shifts the distribution of power away from the incumbent by identifying alternative leaders that elites can rally around if the president were to renege on distributive promises. Institutions that empower and identify specific challengers help to solve elite coordination problems, therefore better allowing them to hold incumbents accountable. Institutionalization limits executive power by creating conditions that actually *threaten* the leader.

My theory underscores the point that the existence of a democratic façade is not of primary importance. Rather, institutions constrain when they change the underlying distribution of power within the ruling coalition. When a leader institutionalizes the regime, she hands the (figurative) sword to someone else while pointing it at herself. This helps to explain why nominally democratic institutions cannot necessarily explain why some regimes are institutionalized systems while others remain personalist

dictatorships. This is especially true when parties or legislatures are empty vehicles that simply *amplify* the authority of an incumbent, rather than constraining them.[3] Institutions matter, not because they establish de jure rules, but when they affect de facto political power.

The theme of how political order becomes established and institutionalized has long been a fundamental question in the study of comparative politics. In a seminal study, Huntington (1968) first emphasized the concept of political institutionalization, arguing that the strength of societies depends on the strength of political organizations and procedures. Organizational durability depends on the extent to which the functions and procedures of these groups become institutionalized – the process by which the institutions themselves acquire "value" and "stability." Importantly, he highlights the need to separate institutions from leaders:

> so long as an organization still has its first set of leaders, so long as a procedure is still performed by those who first performed it, its adaptability is still in doubt. The more often the organization has surmounted the problem of peaceful succession and replaced one set of leaders by another, the more highly institutionalized it is. (Huntington 1968, 14)

This book approaches Huntington's "organization" as the authoritarian regime itself, and examines how executive power in dictatorships can become institutionalized, such that the regime does not depend on any particular set of leaders to survive. How does an authoritarian regime evolve from a government run by "big men" to a system run by rules?

1.2 Examining Regime Outcomes: Personalist Rule and Institutionalized Systems

The world of authoritarian regimes varies considerably in the extent to which politics is governed by set rules, procedures, and norms or controlled by a single personalist strongman.[4] Consider, for example, the well-known cases of highly institutionalized dictatorship in twentieth-century China and Mexico. The People's Republic of China, which was established in 1949 by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of China (CCP), is characterized as a hierarchical system with established norms

[3] I do not claim that all parties and legislatures are window-dressing institutions that do not constrain leaders. Some autocracies, such as in China, the former Soviet Union, or Mexico under the PRI, have well-organized parties and legislatures that do not merely rubber-stamp legislation. However, in many autocracies, these institutions are incredibly weak and do not serve to empower specific elites.

[4] This book uses the terms "dictatorship," "authoritarian regime," and "autocracy" synonymously.

and procedures that govern leadership promotion. The state constitution is considered the highest law – its authority stands above the leader and the ruling party. Since 1949, the regime has undergone four peaceful leadership transitions and remains in power today.

Mexico under the rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) can be characterized similarly as a regime run by established rules and norms. Stable authoritarian rule was established in Mexico in the years following the end of the Mexican Revolution. In 1929, President Plutarco Elías Calles founded the ruling party as a means of institutionalizing elite power sharing that had been established in the resolution of the revolution.[5] Under these agreements, presidents serve one six-year term in office and never seek reelection. The incumbent also handpicks their successor, who then becomes the next president. Elite politics in Mexico would run like clockwork according to these rules for the next 70 years. The PRI regime remained in power until 2000, when it lost the presidential election to an opposition party, the National Action Party (PAN).

In both of these cases, the regime lasted beyond the dictatorship of a single individual to become a system run by rules. Importantly, the process of leadership succession was routinized, allowing for the continuity of the regime beyond the founding leader. Yet, such stable outcomes are not always the story in the world of dictatorships.

Now consider the Democratic Republic of Congo under the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko or the Dominican Republic under Rafel Trujillo – regimes where a highly personalist leader ruled without constraints on his power. Mobutu seized power in the Democratic Republic of Congo through a coup, five years after independence was granted in 1960. During his rule, Mobutu centralized power around himself, rather than sharing it with other elites. He named himself the head of all important political institutions including the minister of defense and singlehandedly decided all appointments and promotions within the regime, often purging elites at will. Mobutu remained in office for 28 years until he was deposed by Laurent-Désiré Kabila during the First Congo War in 1997.

The Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic was a similar story. Rafael Trujillo came to power through a coup in 1930. Upon taking office, he concentrated his personal authority by declaring martial law and killing regime opponents.[6] By the end of his rule, Trujillo had more public

[5] The party was initially called the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR). It was eventually renamed the PRI in 1946.

[6] It is estimated that 500,000 people were killed by the regime's secret police during the Trujillo era.

statues of himself on display in the Dominican Republic than any other world leader at the time. After 31 years in power, Trujillo was assassinated in 1961. Three years later, a democratically elected leader took office but was deposed in a coup four months later.

In both of these cases, the regime failed to survive past a single strongman leader. Yet it is important to remember that single leaders can sometimes remain in office for relatively long periods of time, and this perceived longevity speaks nothing to the institutional quality of the regime. Mobutu and Trujillo both remained in power for three decades. During those periods, the regime retained a façade of stability through the leaders' iron-tight personalist grip on power. However, as Huntington cautioned, this "simple political system" that depended on one individual was, in reality, the least stable form of autocracy. The regime simply could not survive past its founding leader.

These broad patterns extend beyond a few individual cases. Despite a surge in scholarship on authoritarian stability, the world of dictatorships is filled with Mobutus and Trujillos. Leaders often take power (and lose power) via coups, which occur with tremendous frequency. In fact, coup d'états make up the vast majority of nonconstitutional exits from office for dictators (Singh 2014; Svolik 2012). From 1950 to 2014, a total of 235 failed coup attempts and 236 successful coups were carried out in dictatorships. In 1963 and 1966, 12 successful coups were carried out in a single year. In 1991, 10 coups were attempted but failed, in addition to four successful coups that were carried out (Powell and Thyne 2011). Figure 1.1 displays the number of failed and successful coups that have been carried out in dictatorships between 1950 and 2014.

Beyond persistent coup threats to incumbents, leadership transitions are often violent and disruptive, and many regimes fail to survive past the departure of individual leaders. Figure 1.2 displays the number of peaceful and violent leadership transitions over time. From this graph it is easy to see that violent leadership transitions are extremely common. From 1946 to 2008, almost half (44 percent) of all autocratic leadership transitions did not occur peacefully.[7] Even when dictators manage to remain in office until voluntarily retirement or a natural death, elites often wait in the wings, eager to usurp power forcefully, as in the case of Guinea after Sekou Toure. The continuity of the average authoritarian regime when faced with a leadership transition is far from guaranteed. In sum, the

[7] I define a peaceful transition as one where the outgoing leader exits power via regular means and the incoming leaders enters power via regular means – to be defined more precisely later (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009).

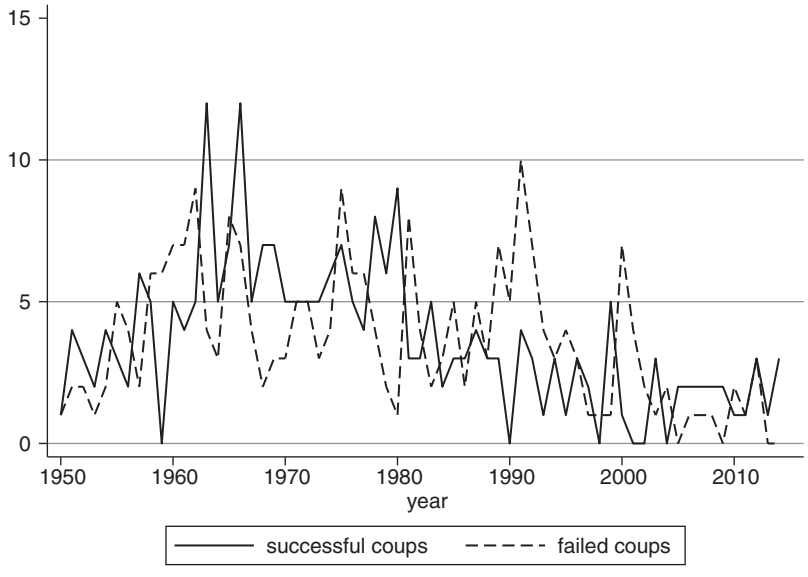

Figure 1.1 Number of failed and successful coups in autocracies

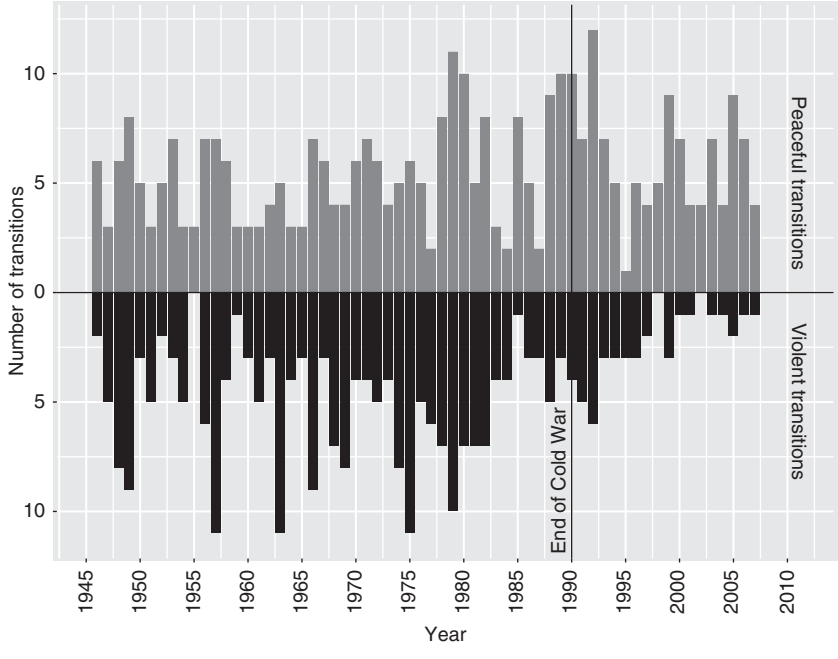

Figure 1.2 Number of violent and peaceful leadership transitions in autocracies

stability of authoritarian regimes varies widely across countries and over time. Differences in stability stem both from threats to leaders while they are in power as well as the durability of the regime in light of leadership transitions. While some dictatorships cease to exist after the death of a single personalist leader, other regimes develop into stable and institutionalized systems.

1.3 SOMETIMES WINDOW PANES, BUT OFTEN WINDOW DRESSING

To explain variation in regime outcomes, recent studies of dictatorship have focused on the role of nominally democratic institutions[8] – such as parties and legislatures – in order to promote authoritarian durability.[9] The general consensus is that institutions matter, even in autocracies. This finding has been hugely important in advancing theories of authoritarian rule – earlier works on dictatorships had completely written off parties, legislatures, and elections as shams. As Gandhi (2008) notes, prior work tended to assume that the presence of authoritarian institutions was little more than "mere window dressing" (xv). The recent "institutional turn" in comparative authoritarianism has rightfully renewed attention to the role of formal institutions in autocracies by highlighting ways in which leaders can benefit strategically from these institutions.[10]

Despite these important advancements in the literature on authoritarian institutions, the presence of parties, legislatures, and elections cannot explain variation in regime outcomes simply because most contemporary dictatorships employ a wide range of institutions. From 1946 to 2008, autocratic leaders maintained a ruling party 87 percent of the time. During that same period, authoritarian regimes had legislatures 85 percent of the time (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010). Figure 1.3 displays the proportion of autocratic countries with ruling parties and legislatures over this period. It is clear that the vast majority of these countries have these institutions in place.

Autocratic constitutions and elections have been just as common. From 1946 to 2008, 93 percent of all autocracies had constitutions (Elkins, Ginsburg, and Melton 2014). During that same period, a total of 2,122

[8] This book uses the terms "quasi-democratic" or "nominally democratic" institutions in autocracies and "authoritarian institutions" synonymously.

[9] See Bracanti (2014), Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018), Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik (2016), Lagace and Gandhi (2015), Magaloni and Kricheli (2010), and Pepinsky (2014) for recent surveys of the literature on authoritarian institutions.

[10] "Institutional turn" phrase borrowed from Pepinsky (2014).

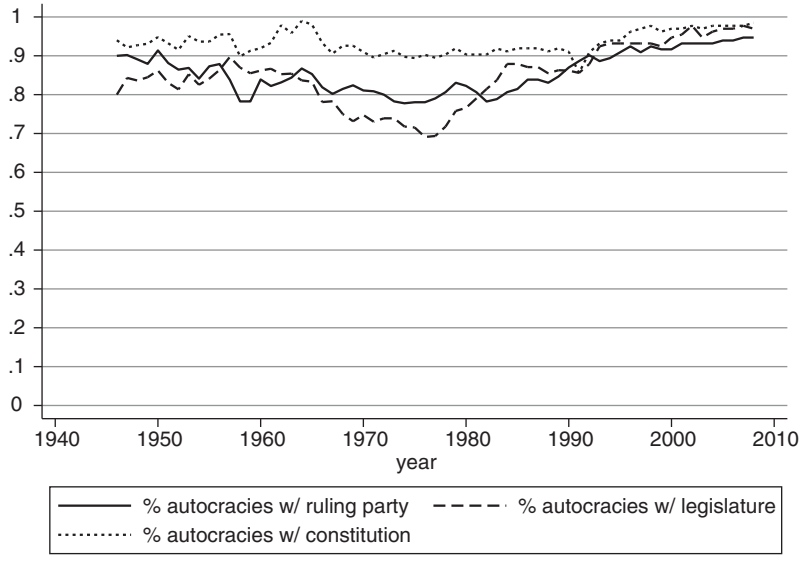

Figure 1.3 Proportion of autocratic countries with nominally democratic institutions

elections were held in 124 countries – 707 presidential elections and 1,415 legislative elections (Hyde and Marinov 2012).[11]

These numbers are not simply being driven by a post-Cold War proliferation of institutions. From 1946 to 1990, 84 percent of authoritarian regimes had parties, 80 percent had legislatures, and 92 percent had constitutions. Moreover, 1,165 elections were held during that time period – 338 presidential elections and 827 legislative elections. The typical post-Second World War autocracy has had parties, legislatures, elections, and constitutions while in power. In other words, the presence of authoritarian institutions is simply unremarkable and there really is minimal variation in the existence of institutions in modern autocracies.

Moreover, most ruling parties fail to outlive the death of the founder. 61 percent of ruling parties do not survive more than a year past the founding leader's death or departure from office, as illustrated in Figure 1.4. Even in cases where the first leader experienced a nonviolent exit from power, only 58 percent of ruling parties outlive the leader. Furthermore, 43 percent of ruling parties that are coded as part of dominant-party regimes fail to survive a year past the departure of the first

[11] The percentage for ruling parties, legislatures, and constitutions are calculated as the percentage of country–year observations that had the institution. The election numbers are presented as counts.