

# New Insights on Africa's Autocratic Past\*

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## Abstract

A new generation of scholarship is significantly revising our understandings of the autocracies of Africa's past, and specifically, elite dynamics within the regimes that came to power between the continent's independence era and the end of the Cold War. Contemporaneous literature painted African autocracies as either personalist dictatorships in which rules governed according to idiosyncratic whims or as highly-institutionalized one-party regimes, current work relies on new and innovative data to challenge this conception in three ways: 1) showing the importance of other formal institutions aside from parties in bolstering autocracy, 2) explaining the ways in which autocrats atop seemingly formalized regimes still infused institutions with personalistic norms, and 3) enumerating how autocrats mitigated the negative externalities of regime personalization. Taken together, this new literature makes us fundamentally reevaluate what we think we know about Africa's former autocracies, while simultaneously providing new directions for understanding the continent's current era of creeping authoritarianism despite the presence of formal institutions meant to constrain the impulses of autocratic rule.

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# 1 Introduction

Africa has not been immune to recent global trends in democratic backsliding. Though the vast majority of countries on the continent have been holding competitive multi-party elections since the end of the Cold War, we are currently witnessing attempts by elected presidents and ruling parties to extend their tenures through undemocratic means (Lesta (2017); Morse (2020); Paget (2020); Opalo and Smith (2021)). These trends are concerning, not only for those seeing their rights and freedoms constrict, but because they are happening despite the presence of formal democratic institutions that are meant to curb the impulses of autocratic rule.

Our current era is not the first in which Africans have seen the erasure of hard-fought political freedoms as African countries turned autocratic after brief flirtations with democracy at independence. And similar to today, the autocracies of Africa's past boasted many of the formal institutions that we assume should constrain executives. For instance, data from the Varieties of Democracy project indicate that, for each year between 1960-1991 in sub-Saharan Africa, 90% of autocracies ruled through a political party, 74% had a legislature, and 81% had a constitution.<sup>1</sup> However this widespread existence of formal institutions in Africa's past autocracies, as today, conceals the wide variation in these institutions' usage to constrain leaders. Contemporaneous scholarship written during the continent's autocratic era tended to bifurcate descriptions of African regimes as either ruled by "big men" who completely disregarded formal institutions and instead treated their countries like personal fiefdoms, or as dominated by an institutionalized party-state in which the ruling party, and not the autocrat himself, dictated all aspects of governance.

In this review, I survey recent research that revisits and reconsiders Africa's past to give new insights into how autocratic regimes can rely on formal, seemingly democratic institutions to sustain autocracy. Taken together, current scholarship significantly revises dominant narratives about authoritarianism and shows the imprecision of analyzing Africa's former autocracies as either per-

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<sup>1</sup>These summary statistics subset the Varieties of Democracy data to sub-Saharan Africa and examine questions, v2psparban\_ord, v2lgbicam, v2caprotac respectively.

sonalist dictatorships or institutionalized party-states. It takes aim at this false dichotomy in three important ways.

First, newer research on the continent continues to delve into the role of formal institutions for autocracy, but does so by moving past parties as the central institution for autocratic survival. It therefore pushes the field to question the importance of parties alone in maintaining regime stability, suggesting that the classic literature on the Africa party-state may have focused too narrowly on only the most visible institutional means of authoritarian durability. Second, this research chips away at the dichotomy between regimes that were personalized versus regimes that relied on formal institutions. By digging into the content of authoritarian formal institutions, we see that many autocrats of seemingly institutionalized regimes personalized key elements of how those formal institutions operated. Third, and relatedly, contemporary scholarship examines how autocrats dealt with the downstream implications of regime personalization. The disadvantages that autocrats face when they rely too heavily on neo-patrimonial norms are well known; new work instead highlights some of the informal tactics that autocrats adopted to mitigate negative elements of personalism.

At first blush, it may seem concerning that current research analyzes the same dictatorships as contemporaneous research but has reached different conclusions. However this discrepancy is largely due to new data that has only recently become available. For instance, archives are often closed for a set number of years before they are accessible to researchers; and though reliance on archives is not without concerns about the data generation and preservation processes (Balcells and Sullivan, 2018), it is only now, decades after many of the continent's most insidious autocracies have fallen, that we can take an inside look at how they were run. In other cases, democratization has given former regime opponents and dissidents the freedom to discuss their experiences without fear of state retaliation. This, in turn, gives today's researchers diverse viewpoints into these regimes and ultimately a more complete understanding of how they strived for political control. For these reasons, we should not simply conclude that the wave of recent work on Africa's regimes of yesteryear is old wine in new bottles. Instead, this research agenda represents a fundamental

reevaluation about what we think we know about African autocracy.

## 2 Classifying Authoritarian Regimes: Africa and Beyond

As autocracy took root soon after the independence era, contemporaneous scholarship documented the ways in which these regimes operated, and specifically, how they dealt with the problem of power-sharing among the ruling elite. Most autocrats are deposed through a coup d'état from a regime insider, so managing other elites is of critical importance (Svolik, 2012).

Some African autocrats handled the problem of authoritarian power-sharing by creating highly personalistic regimes in which power emanated from themselves. Instead of engaging with elites through established channels and formal regime institutions, personalist leaders dealt with elites through informal and unofficial mechanisms. Perhaps best exemplifying this type of rule is the reign of Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko. Elites served at Mobutu's whim, laws were crafted or dismantled based on his acute political challenges, and access to spoils was through Mobutu himself. Though Zaire retained many formal governing institutions that ostensibly split power among different positions and people, “[b]eneath this institutional facade, power was steadily patrimonialized” (Young and Turner, 1985, 30). In other cases, “big man” leaders were drawn from the armed forces (Decalo, 1973); though some military autocracies institutionalize and formalize large components of their regimes, Africa's military leaders tended to be just as personalistic as civilian ones. To Robert Jackson and Carl Jackson, then, rule in Africa “is a system of relations linking rulers ... with patrons, associates, clients, supporters, and rivals” (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982, 19). In fact, they open their book by writing that “[p]olitics in most Black African states do not conform to an institutionalized system” (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982, 1).

While many western academics characterized personalist dictators as the archetype of African autocracy, other contemporaneous literature focused on regimes run by the ruling party (Kilson, 1963; Collier, 1978). Unlike personalist autocracies, single-party autocracies regimes were con-

sidered highly institutionalized with all regime matters occurring through formal channels that existed apart from, and superseded, the autocrat. In the five West African cases highlighted by Aristide Zolberg (1966), regimes were able to suppress political opposition through the party's formal control over elements of the state. For instance, partisan bureaucrats – who only obtained their state position due to rising through the party hierarchy – would pass and enforce laws that systematically biased against the opposition. This is similar to dynamics in Jomo Kenyatta's Kenya where laws that were imposed to repress indigenous Africans during the country's anti-colonial struggle were used to stifle political opponents of the ruling party in the post-independence period (Mueller, 1984). Similarly in Daniel arap Moi's Kenya, the ruling party "increasingly became a vehicle for the Office of the President [within the state] to control political opposition" (Widner, 1992, 3). Studies on Zambia showed the importance of the ruling party for Kenneth Kaunda's longevity in office since its control over the state was used to stifle factionalism, fund businesses of elites connected to the party, and sustain mass support (Bratton, 1980; Gertzel and Szeftel, 1984). Unlike in personalist dictatorships, this literature argues that autocrats at the helm of regimes with a dominant party do not manage other elites through direct, personal ties. Instead, the party as a hierarchical organization that controls the state formally constricts the political space, and in the process, limits challenges to the autocrat.

The seminal piece by Barbara Geddes (1999) on autocracies globally can thus be seen as an extension of the regime type distinctions made by contemporaneous research on the continent. She differentiated regimes based on their (lack of) formal institutions: personalist dictatorships where formal institutions are absent or window dressing face different opportunities and constraints than regimes in which autocracies are run by parties which in turn operate differently from regimes where the military dominates. And the formal institutions that an autocracy relies upon affects important outcomes such as elite power-sharing dynamics and regime durability.

Other scholars of autocracy beyond Africa built on insights by Geddes (1999) to both note the existence of formal institutions aside from parties and explicate their value to autocrats (Gandhi,

2008; Svolik, 2012). By providing autocratic elite rivals with clear, consistent, and predictable understandings of others' expected behavior or the autocrat's commitment to power-sharing in the future, formal institutions temper elites' willingness to destabilize the regime in the present and thus contribute to regime durability and the autocrat's continued tenure in office. While leaders of personalist regimes share spoils and power as well, they do so through highly unstable personalistic ties – “access to office and the fruits of office depends much more on the discretion of an individual leader” (Geddes, 1999, 121) – that leads to systematically weaker regimes.

### **3 Formal Institutions Under African Autocracy**

Recent advances in African politics have pushed back against the conventional wisdom on the continent's former autocracies. In so doing, this scholarship has grown our understanding on how autocracy works in Africa – and across the globe. Below, I synthesize some of these advances across three related topics: on the impetus to move past parties in studying formal institutions under autocracy, on the inherent personalism within even seemingly institutionalized regimes, and the ways in which autocrats mitigated negative consequences of personalism.

#### **3.1 Moving Past Parties**

While new research continues to unpack how African autocrats use(d) dominant parties (Riedl, 2014; Roessler, 2016; Kroeger, 2017; Morse, 2020; Paget, 2020), other scholarship explores the ways in which autocrats rely on other formal institutions – from courts within the state (Shen-Bayh, 2018, Forthcoming) to freemasonry lodges outside of it (Carter, 2021) – to solve the problem of elite power-sharing.

Perhaps at the forefront of this trend is work by Leonardo Arriola (2009). Looking at the continent as a whole, Arriola (2009) leverages variation in cabinet composition over time to gain intellectual traction on the incorporation of elites into the regime. By appointing an elite into the

cabinet and installing him as head of a state ministry, the elite gives his tacit support for the leader’s continued reign in exchange for access to that ministry’s coffers and influence in that ministry’s policies. And in fact, Arriola (2009) finds that larger cabinets are generally associated with a lower risk of coups. The exception to the relationship between cabinet size and lower coup risk seems to further prove the rule. Coup risk increases if cabinets become too large – the higher the number of ministers, the lower the amount of state spoils each receives and thus the greater their incentive to defect.

In addition, research has begun to examine the content of these formal institutions. Anne Meng (2020) shows that most autocracies, in Africa and beyond, have parties and other formal institutions. Thus, to understand important outcomes which vary considerably across regimes, we cannot simply examine the mere presence of nearly ubiquitous formal institutions but instead, must analyze the extent to which these formal institutions actually constrain dictatorship. For instance, more credible power sharing arrangements within formal institutions – such as through the appointment of a Minister of Defense within the cabinet, arguably the most dangerous post which an autocrat can empower another elite – are associated with regime durability (Meng, 2020).

In delving into the black box of how formal institutions work, this literature fundamentally reevaluates the centrality of parties to Africa’s authoritarian regimes. As an example, reconsider classic descriptions of Kenya’s strong party-state (Widner, 1992). Recent scholarship, however, illustrates the essentiality of state institutions, and not the party, for regime stability (Opalo, 2018; Hassan, 2020). It does so using a range of new data, from transcripts of legislative debates to correspondence between state and party elites preserved in archives. Rather than an image of ruling party dominance, this wealth of new information shows that the country’s administrative and governing structure, the Provincial Administration, was used to prop-up the party; bureaucrats were expected to use their formal state authority, for instance, to grow the party’s membership and hold fundraisers to fill party coffers. In this way, the ruling party’s dominance, “came from grafting itself onto the Provincial Administration” (Hassan, 2020, 154). Further, and because of

the strength of the Provincial Administration, Ken Opalo (2018) shows that the legislature became an important regime institution: Kenyan autocrats' ability to maintain control over elites through the state gave autocrats the space to allow elites a longer leash in the legislature, thereby having this formal institution serve as an effective tool by which elites could negotiate over pork and policy.

Or consider new innovative research by Fiona Shen-Bayh (2018, Forthcoming) who examines autocratic responses to failed coup attempts. These moments are arguably autocrats' most vulnerable because of the survival of “the invisible enemy” (Woldense, Accepted): though autocrats can easily identify and punish major coup conspirators, they have a more difficult time discerning minor players and other elites who did not participate but held sympathies for the conspirators. Relying on archival data from the continent and Britain, she uncovers the importance of courts in silencing the invisible enemy. A political trial can show the invisible enemy that the autocrat maintains elite support: even if the trial’s narrative is not believable, “[a]ssembling an audience in court thus ensures that each member of the crowd sees other members observing the same story at the same time ... to see others act *as if* these proceedings are credible can compel individuals to act *as if they agree*” (Shen-Bayh, Forthcoming, 10). Autocrats could thus rely on courts to sustain the unity that we had previously assumed came solely through dominant parties: though this portrait of regime stability originates in courts, this performance is continuously, and publicly, enacted through dominant parties.

In this way, research by Opalo, Shen-Bayh, and others underscores the importance of revisiting past regimes today: without data that has only become available recently, many contemporaneous researchers were unable to observe where elite unity originated. What seemed from the outside as ruling party strength may have actually emanated from other, less conspicuous, formal institutions. That is, there is a wide diversity of formal institutions with similar and overlapping purposes within any autocracy. Thus, no one institution can be studied on its own: the outcomes we care about are the product of how multiple formal institutions interact and must be studied as such.<sup>2</sup> And in

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<sup>2</sup>This point is adapted from Tapscott (2021), who makes this argument with regards to state institutions vis-à-vis their

examining formal institutions in tandem, we see how they can nest among each other and become self-reinforcing, further making us question if we can truly isolate the stabilizing effects of any one institution on its own.

### **3.2 Formal Institutions Stabilize Through Personalism**

Recent research on autocracy on Africa also makes us reconsider the dichotomy between personalized versus institutionalized regimes made by contemporaneous work. When we interrogate the content of formal institutions under dictatorship, we see that many African autocrats infused formal institutions with neo-patrimonial norms. That is, even in regimes in which formal institutions played key roles, state resources and power were not only distributed according to the clear, formal criteria laid out in these institutions and as is necessary to promote mutual elite expectations and regime stability via elite power sharing. Instead, leaders attempted to undermine the independence of formal institutions, co-opting these institutions for personal gain. Rather than viewing institutionalized party-states as fundamentally distinct from personalized dictatorships, contemporary research shows the underlying similarity across ostensibly different regimes. Binding them together is their reliance, albeit to different degrees, on neo-patrimonialism – the “institutional hallmark” of autocracy on the continent (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997).

To be sure, others have recognized this false bifurcation as well.<sup>3</sup> However research on African autocracies, in which elements of regime personalization are particularly high, shows us how personalism can not only co-exist with formal institutions, but work through them. Consider again African cabinets. As described above, cabinets are thought to provide elites an institutionalized channel by which to access state spoils and affect government policy. But African autocrats routinely shuffle their cabinets – that is, they implement an informal management technique within this formal institution – largely to protect against an elite from becoming too embedded within

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relations with citizens.

<sup>3</sup>For instance, see Svolik (2012) for a critique of Geddes (1999), as well as Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018) and Gandhi and Sumner (Forthcoming) on power consolidation and personalization.

a particular ministry and amassing a following of his own (Roessler, 2011; Francois, Rainer and Trebbi, 2014; Kroeger, 2017; Meng, 2020).

Recent work on autocracies that began their reign during the Cold War but persisted deep into the 21<sup>st</sup> century extends our understanding of personalism within formal institutions. Rebecca Tapscott (2021), looking at Uganda under Museveni, argues that the degree to which any formal institution implements its official mandate varies and can change even in the short run. That is, while some formal institutions may exhibit strong norms of personalism and neo-patrimonialism in some interactions with society, they may function in the way that they were officially intended in others. This institutional arbitrariness stabilizes the regime since those considering challenging it must incorporate a higher degree of uncertainty about the regime's response: without a clear expectation of the consequences of opposition, many choose not to put up resistance at all.

Another example comes from the recently deposed *Inqāz* regime of Sudan, in which former President Omer al-Bashir varied his reliance on formal institutions and those institutions' degree of personalism. At times he leaned heavily on the highly-organized Islamist Movement (Muslim Brotherhood), the ruling party, and the legislature to assuage disparate regime factions and formally share power with other elites (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019). But when al-Bashir's chief rival, Hassan al-Turabi, became too powerful – al-Turabi attempted to rewrite the constitution to limit presidential authority and thus use the independence of formal institutions to check the executive – al-Bashir personalized these institutions so that they would no longer constrain his ability to oust al-Turabi (Roessler, 2016).

In sum, African autocrats have excelled at infusing various formal institutions with informal norms to simultaneously provide elites with somewhat stable, predictable, and clear streams of resources while continuing to wed elites to themselves. This dual response aims to both limit elites willingness to launch an elite challenge, through continued state spoils, and their ability to do so, by making those spoils contingent on the elite's relationship to the autocrat.

### **3.3 Mitigating Personalization’s Negative Costs**

The personalization of formal institutions is not without costs, and past research has highlighted the general weakness and instability of uninstitutionalized regimes (Geddes, 1999; Gandhi, 2008; Meng, 2021). The current slate of scholarship on African autocracy moves past simply describing how dictators steeped formal institutions with neo-patrimonial norms to examine the ways in which autocrats attempted to counter-balance some of personalism’s negative costs.

Consider research on the loyalty-competence trade-off. All else equal, autocrats might prefer to staff formal institutions with competent people who have the ability to complete their jobs more efficiently. Yet dictators who cannot monitor subordinates are thought to best achieve compliance with politicized directives by packing formal institutions with those whose largest qualification is their loyalty to the leader – necessarily sacrificing ability for compliance. However recent work shows how autocrats were able to navigate the loyalty-competence trade-off for their benefit.<sup>4</sup> In Kenya, for example, former presidents managed the Provincial Administration, the country’s most important administrative and governing agency, to ensure compliance where it mattered (Hassan, 2020). Autocrats never packed the Provincial Administration with co-ethnic bureaucrats who were perceived as the most loyal precisely because of the negative consequences associated with blatant ethnic favoritism. Instead, the agency’s most loyal bureaucrats were disproportionately sent to govern the parts of the country that were most important for regime stability, whereas those considered disloyal were kept away from these vital areas. Shen-Bayh (Forthcoming) examines how autocrats of former British colonies balanced the benefits of institutional punishment through the courts with the potential of competent, professionalized judges justly ruling in favor of the defendant. Many of these leaders disproportionately relied on white Englishmen to judge political trials. These men were often just as competent and professionalized as their African counterparts, but more importantly, were thought to be more loyal and easier to control because they were more dependent on the autocrat.

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<sup>4</sup>See Brierley (2020) on navigating between competence and loyalty in modern democratic Ghana.

Or take research on embeddedness. As described above, many autocrats constantly shuffle subordinates across positions. This tactic prevents subordinates from amassing sufficient clout and resources within their post to potentially challenge the autocrat. However shuffling is also detrimental since it reduces a subordinate's level of tacit knowledge within a given position. Yet new work suggests that autocrats can optimize shuffling and embeddedness to glean their respective benefits while limiting each's costs. In some cases, this optimization is done over space with autocrats playing different strategies in different parts of the country. Where the population is supportive of the leader, such as in his core regions, he need not worry about appointees' local embeddedness – subordinates will not be able to find local support should they attempt to challenge the autocrat. These areas are thus more likely to see bureaucrats who serve long tenures and who become innately more familiar with the jurisdiction over time, ultimately resulting in the jurisdiction's better governance (Carter and Hassan, 2021). In other cases, autocrats take into account a subordinate's transferable skills before shuffling them to a new post. Josef Woldense (2018) finds that Emperor Selassie concentrated elite appointments in organizational sectors. For instance, elites who were shuffled out of the Ministry of Defense would be placed in the military; elites who were shuffled from positions in the Ministry of Justice would find themselves in the courts. In this way, Selassie could still make use of the knowledge and experience of viziers without taking on as much risk in allowing them to become embedded within a ministry or organization.

## 4 Conclusion

In this review, I have highlighted new literature on Africa's past authoritarian era. Much of this emerging work distinguishes itself from contemporaneous accounts that emerged alongside these past regimes through its utilization of innovative data that have only become available to scholars recently. Together, this research shows how Africa's former autocrats relied on both neopatrimonial norms and a range of formal institutions in their attempts to stabilize their regimes.

Yet while the study of authoritarianism in Africa has made large advances in recent years, there is more to be understood and especially given the continent’s creeping authoritarianism. I therefore lay out some areas within the study of elite authoritarian dynamics that future scholars may develop as they turn to study contemporary illiberal regimes. I then conclude this essay with a call for a pivot in the study of authoritarianism in Africa – our current moment demands that we look past elite dynamics and instead understand citizens’ behavioral responses towards, and attempts to push back against, tyranny.

## 4.1 New Directions

The continent’s halting progress towards democratic consolidation means that contemporary scholars have the ability, but also an imperative, to study the institutional dynamics that have led to our current back-sliding environment in real time. I suggest scholarship do so by focusing on two areas within this broader topic to build on past insights. First, and given the widespread presence of nominally democratic institutions under autocracy, research needs to better explicate the downstream implications of different institutions on various elements of democratization. And second, scholarship must continue to interrogate how a new generation of leaders is re-purposing nominally democratic institutions to grow their executive authority and backslide into autocracy. Ultimately, this work needs to ask about the conditions under which leaders undermine and undo formal constraints on their rule, and more importantly, to the extent to which domestic civil society and the international community can fortify formal institutions moving forward.

The continent’s recent backsliding is also providing scholars with an (unwelcome) opportunity to examine other topics within the field of African autocracy, and specifically, the interplay between these regimes and their populations. This review spotlighted autocratic strategies to address the problem of authoritarian power-sharing among elites, but in so doing, has largely sidestepped the question of authoritarian control and how autocrats attempt to achieve wide-spread civilian compliance with regime objectives (Svolik, 2012; Hassan, Mattingly and Nugent, 2022). My fo-

cus is in part because of the nature of the data that contemporary scholars use to study fallen authoritarian regimes: archival correspondence, bureaucratic reports, and cabinet records about elites operating within a country's formal institutions. These types of written records help us understand elite relations but are less useful to understand the political behaviors of the ordinary citizens who lived under these regimes.

Instead, many scholars have begun to address important questions in this space with a focus on contemporary autocracies and hybrid regimes. For instance, some are examining the extent to which strategies of political control – from state repression to propaganda – lead to citizen capitulation versus backlash mobilization (Young, 2019; Carter and Carter, 2021; Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021). Others seek to understand the conditions under which citizens cooperate with an autocracy (Curtice, Forthcoming), disengage politically (Croke et al., 2016), or instead reject the ruling regime altogether (Platas and Raffler, Forthcoming). And still others examine the dynamics of political behavior itself, such as new work on popular collective action within the Horn and across the Sahel (Arriola, 2013; Mueller, 2018; Hassan, 2021).

Further, and unlike the contemporaneous scholarship of Africa's post-independence autocracies, scholars today have access to more sophisticated tools to help them uncover these dynamics. Of course, nothing will ever compensate for in-depth qualitative and ethnographic research that uncovers the hidden processes of politics (Fu and Simmons, 2021). But due in part to the systematic manipulation of official government data by authoritarian regimes (Carlitz and McLellan, 2020), many are relying on innovative data sources and new methodological advances to expand their scope of inquiry and better understand the dynamics of autocracy. This includes the use of automated text analysis of government-run newspapers that quantify the political slant of indoctrinating material (Carter and Carter, 2021) to field experiments with politicians to improve legislators' bureaucratic oversight over autocratic states (Raffler, Forthcoming).<sup>5</sup> These continued

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<sup>5</sup>See Davis (2020), Davis and Michelitch (Forthcoming), and Herman et al. (Forthcoming) for how to run more ethical and precise RCTs given realities of the African implementation environment.

efforts will undoubtedly deepen our base of knowledge and ensure that scholarship on the continent's autocracies remains a fertile topic at the forefront of African studies, political science, and public policy.

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