Non-Systematic Leadership Change

in Authoritarian Regimes:

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Presented in CPW

February 15, 2013

Note to CPW participants: I'm trying to think of some new ways to adjudicate between varying theories of authoritarian leadership change. I think I still need to do some work to frame this section properly, but I'm interested in hearing your ideas about how to refine the puzzle and how to find a tractable approach to measuring the balance of power within regimes. I think the first step is distinguishing empirically between established and contested autocracies and then the next step will be to explore the causes of non-constitutional leadership change within the two regime types.

Introduction

Authoritarian leaders face fewer institutional constraints than their democratic counterparts. As a result, they are often able to manipulate rules and resources to ensure their continued political dominance. But leadership change does occur in authoritarian regimes, and it most frequently occurs through non-constitutional means. Roughly two thirds of all instances of authoritarian leadership change from 1946-2008 occurred outside of the regime's institutional framework and against the will of the authoritarian leader. Furthermore, fully 68 percent of these irregular ousters were carried out by challengers from within the elite ruling coalition (Svolik 2012, p. 41). Authoritarian leaders have some impressive incumbency advantages, but it appears they are often overthrown by the very people who initially helped to install them in power. Such leadership changes are, by definition, non-systematic. Yet the frequency with which they occur suggests that it should be possible to uncover some systematic causes.

The support coalition

Many explanations of authoritarian durability propose that leaders retain their leadership positions by sharing power and resources with their supporters. No individual is likely to have the political strength necessary to ascend to leadership alone. Instead, new leaders depend on powerful friends to support their bid for power and to maintain them in office. In turn, leaders promise to reward their loyal friends by sharing with them

the spoils of office (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, Svolik 2012). Every leader thus has a *support coalition* whose political resources help to maintain the leader in power.

Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) propose that coalitions of supporters are drawn to leaders who make *credible* promises. Incumbent leaders have a key advantage over challengers in that their promises are always more credible than those of the challenger. Challengers can promise any number of things to any number of people, but their promises ultimately amount to cheap talk because they cannot fulfill their promises until after they are in office. Incumbents can point to the promises they have already fulfilled as evidence that they will honor any future promises they make to their support coalition.

The central theoretical finding of the Selectorate model proposed by Bueno de Mesquita et al. is that incumbent authoritarian leaders have a very stable hold on power because no challenger can credibly promise a better deal to regime elites. And yet, most leaders do not die peacefully in bed; they are instead replaced by a challenger who has somehow won over a portion of the incumbent's support coalition. Clearly, some assumptions of the Selectorate model must be relaxed to explain this empirical reality.

One key assumption in the Selectorate model is that the size of the support coalition is exogenously fixed. Any successful leader needs a very specific number of people who control a very specific quantity of resources. Svolik (2012) suggests, to the contrary, that the size of a leader's support coalition can be endogenously manipulated. In Svolik's model, authoritarian leaders struggle with the issue of *authoritarian power sharing*. Authoritarian institutions can always be overruled by recourse to raw power, so that even if the leader has demonstrated a willingness to share resources with a specific

group of supporters in the past, he may invoke his power as leader and decide not to follow through on his promises to share resources similarly in the future. In some cases, leaders can choose to shrink the size of the support coalition by marginalizing some of its members through denunciation, firing, imprisonment, or execution. Stalin, for example, consolidated power by purging influential government officials and members of the Communist Party during the 1930s. In other cases, leaders might wish to enlarge the support coalition by bringing additional loyal supporters into the fold. In another example from the Soviet Union, Khruschev empowered the formerly weak Central Committee of the Communist Party after Stalin's death and thus staved off a coup from within the small, formerly very powerful Party Presidium. A key point is that any time the leader alters the size of the support coalition, he breaks the promises he made to the support coalition that helped bring him to power.

Svolik argues that two stable equilibria exist with regard to authoritarian power sharing. First, the leader can do his best to honor his agreement with the original support coalition. His supporters may still worry that he will try to appropriate power and resources for himself beyond what the agreement provides for. But, institutions such as political parties and legislatures provide opportunities for monitoring and enforcement that allow a delicate balance of power to be maintained. The result is what Svolik calls a *contested autocracy*. In such regimes, the leader is constrained by the threat of coups. By contrast, an *established autocracy* develops when the leader reneges on his agreement with the support coalition, appropriates much of their power for himself, and in a manner of speaking becomes his own support coalition. In established autocracies, no group is powerful enough to credibly threaten a coup. In Svolik's view, effective leaders either

monopolize power or share it through institutions. Leaders who fail at both of these strategies are ousted: the support coalition perceives a defection on the part of the leader and controls enough political power to force him to step down.

According to this theory, the proportion of power and resources that the leader keeps for himself is a key determinant of stable leadership. Leaders who share freely last until their support coalitions perceive (correctly or incorrectly) that they have kept too big a share of the available resources or appropriated to big a share of power. Leaders who actually succeed in appropriating a majority share of resources and power last much longer, often until their natural deaths. The balance of power between the leader and his supporters determines whether the regime will develop as a stable contested autocracy, an unstable contested democracy in which leadership change is frequent, or an established autocracy.

Power and resources

The concepts of *power* and *resources* have been mentioned several times at this point and should be more thoroughly conceptualized. Bueno de Mesquita et al. focus on the extent to which the leader shares economic rents; resources are the key to their analysis. Svolik explains that a "power grab" can take the form of a failure to share rents, but it can also be realized by marginalizing a member of the support coalition and thereby reducing the total power of the support coalition. In Svolik's model, power and resources are treated as interchangeable leadership resources.

For the purposes of this paper, power and resources are considered to be conceptually distinct. Power is the ability to make decisions and have them carried out. It

depends on the ability to influence people; it grows through the development of networks of professional and personal relationships. Leaders must harness the power of elites and combine it with their own power in order to retain control of the country. By contrast, resources are forms of wealth that are produced in the economy and that can be used to reward supporters for sharing their power. Resources are connected to leader durability to the extent that they can be used to buy power, but they are not directly related to leader survival. Whereas power grows over time and can be difficult to transfer among individuals, resources are concrete and can be passed more easily from person to person.

Slater proposes that political actors can have two different types of power. *Despotic power* is the power to decide, and *infrastructural power* is the power to implement decisions (2003). This distinction is helpful in understanding the balance of power between the leader and his support coalition and its effect on coup vulnerability.

Measuring the balance of power

In his empirical tests of leadership stability, Svolik (2012) uses the length of a leader's tenure as a proxy for the amount of power he controls relative to his support coalition. But this operationalization is somewhat tautological in that length of tenure is essentially being used to explain length of tenure. The argument is basically that if a leader stays in power long enough, he is likely to achieve a favorable balance of power, which will in turn enable him to remain in power for an even longer period of time. An exploration of the hazard rate for leadership failure in all cases of authoritarian leadership from 1946-2008 provides some evidence for this. As figure 1 shows, many leaders fail in the first few years, but those who last through those first few years experience declining

hazard rates. The hazard rate increases again after a leader has spent 25 years or so in power, but at that point, most leaders (88%) exit power through constitutional means (dying a natural death, stepping down willingly, etc.) (Svolik 2012, p. 77).

Figure 1: Authoritarian leadership changes, 1946-2008.
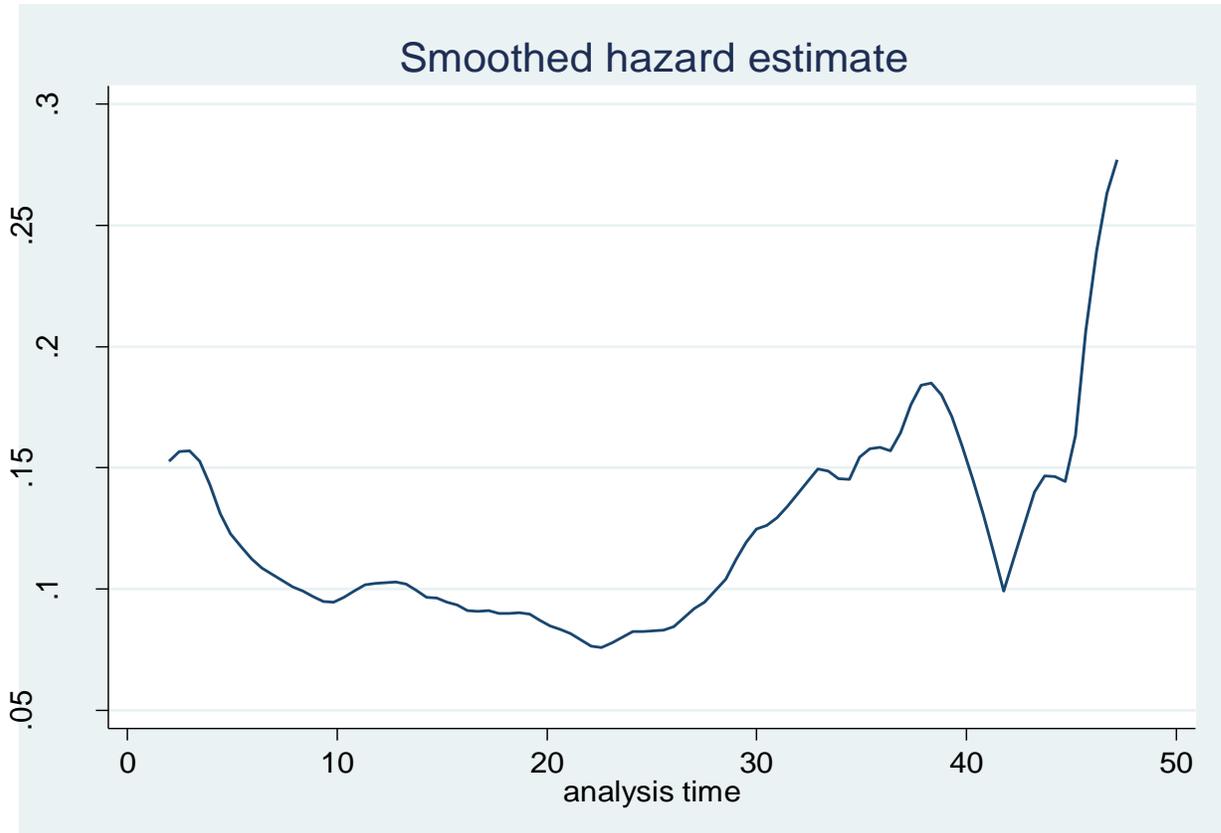
Data from Svolik (2012). The figure represents all leaders who controlled authoritarian regimes between 1946 and 2008. Periods of civil war or foreign occupation are excluded. Right-censored data is also excluded because the structure of the data did not allow for its useful inclusion in the figure.

Balance of power is an intuitively appealing explanation for coup vulnerability, but the relationship has not been adequately tested. A better operationalization of balance of power might involve measuring the amount of despotic power relative to

infrastructural power held by members of the support coalition. The following explanation will clarify how and why such a variable might be utilized.

Any leader in a complex society depends on members of his government to help him implement policy. One person cannot possibly perform all the functions of government and must trust members of his support coalition with bureaucratic duties. Regimes might vary cross-sectionally in terms of the total amount of infrastructural power they possess, but all leaders necessarily share infrastructural power quite generously with their supporters. Infrastructural power can be given to supporters quite simply by installing them at the heads of important government bodies.

Despotic power, on the other hand, is based on networks of power relationships that develop over time. At the outset of a leader's tenure, he is likely to share despotic power somewhat evenly with the members of his support coalition. The reason for this is that a candidate for leadership must depend on people with real political influence to persuade others to acquiesce to his installation as leader. Once the leader is installed in power, he theoretically has a duty to reward his supporters with economic resources and positions or titles that will allow them to continue to accrue despotic power. Instead, a leader may choose to remove people with despotic power from the support coalition by charging them with malfeasance of some sort and relieving them of their formal duties. In such cases, the discredited politician's infrastructural power (his title) can be given to a loyal friend of the leader. But the despotic power of the individual is destroyed, giving the leader a boost in despotic power relative to his support coalition. The balance of despotic power can therefore be significantly skewed in the leader's favor.

Imagine two ideal regime types similar to Svolik's contested and established autocracies. In the purest version of an established autocracy, infrastructural power is fragmented but despotic power is concentrated in the hands of the leader. This powerful leader has a support coalition that is largely composed of individuals who serve at the leader's favor and have little in the way of autonomous despotic power. These individuals will likely have been brought into the support coalition after the leader's selection and will be given important roles not because the dictator needs to utilize their independent power networks, but because he values their loyalty. The dictator will have the ultimate say in policy making and will depend on his supporters only to implement his decisions and oversee day to day bureaucratic operations. Supporters are too weak to stage a coup, so they take what they can get and are careful not to call too much attention to themselves.

In Kenya from 1964-1997, for example, Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi headed civilian governments but considered the military an important source of political influence and wished to maintain their support. To achieve this end, Kenyatta packed the military leadership throughout the 1960s and 1970s with members of his ethnic group, the Kikuyu. When Moi came to power in 1978, thanks in great measure to two powerful Kikuyu politicians, he began marginalizing Kikuyu officers and promoting members of his own ethnic group, the Kalenjin (N'Diaye 2002). Both of these leaders managed to minimize the despotic power of their support coalitions and to install co-ethnic supporters in positions of power. These new supporters had a similar amount of infrastructural power to their predecessors but significantly less despotic power.

Similarly, in Malaysia from 1981-2003, Mahathir Mohamad filled the ruling party, the judiciary, and the police with loyal supporters while marginalizing rivals and their supporters. He succeeded in creating a system with an immense amount of infrastructural power that was controlled by despotic power that was concentrated almost exclusively in his hands (Slater 2003).

At the other end of the spectrum, the leader is first among equals in terms of the distribution of despotic power. He consults with various members of his support coalition before making decisions and fears retribution in the form of a coup if he attempts to implement policies that run counter to the wishes of his supporters. Both infrastructural and despotic power are fragmented.

For example, Mexico under the PRI established a sturdy set of authoritarian institutions that regularized leadership change and ensured that power was shared relatively equally among the elites. Any ruler who attempted to appropriate undue power of overstay his term limits would face a large contingent of politicians with enough despotic power to stage a successful coup (Magaloni 2008).

To measure the concentration of despotic power empirically, one would have to enumerate the members of the support coalition at a given time and look into their backgrounds to determine whether they had independent power networks before joining the leaders support coalition or whether they were plucked from obscurity to form a politically weak but loyal base of support for the leader. In the next phase of the project, I will develop a more concrete method for making these distinctions, but I would argue that the data is available and that it provides a much more nuanced measure of balance of power than a leader's tenure or any other method that has been proposed in the literature.

Another future goal of this project is to examine other factors that might cause variation in coup vulnerability, especially in contested autocracies where despotic power is less concentrated and leaders must earn sufficient power through resource sharing. These factors are related to the ability of challengers to offer superior resources under some conditions, and include variation in the competency of leadership (ability to produce economic performance) and variation in the credibility of challenger and incumbent promises.

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