

BOOK REVIEW

Constraining dictatorship: from personalized rule to institutionalized regimes, by Anne Meng, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 276 pp., \$24.49 (e-book), eISBN: 9781108877497, \$31.42 (paperback), ISBN: 1108792472

During the third wave of democratization, many autocratic leaders adopted nominally democratic institutions to prolong their stay in power. The effects of these institutions vary, however. In some regimes they routinely fail to constrain the leader and are generally weak while in others they do limit personal power. In *Constraining Dictatorship*, Meng argues that it is important to understand why there is a difference in the strength of autocratic institutions and how these differences affect regime survival. While existing research on authoritarianism has often addressed pseudo-democratic institutions, Meng concentrates on the regime executive – the president – to shed greater light on the role of leaders in shaping the survival of modern authoritarian regimes, with a geographical focus on Sub-Saharan Africa.

One of the major contributions of the book concerns the operationalization of “institutionalization”, which is widely used in comparative politics but rarely systematically defined. However, instead of focusing on institutions *per se*, Meng draws our attention to the motivations of autocrats to establish these institutions and the consequences they might have for the survival of autocracies. The author develops a formal model to identify conditions that would force autocrats to institutionalize their regimes. By institutionalization the author implies that the regime is governed by rules and procedures rather than a single man. She argues that institutional choices differ depending on leaders’ strength when they enter power. Meng argues that initially weak actors such as post-coup leaders tend to share power with the elite to maintain their support and consequently institutionalize the regime. In contrast, strong leaders such as founding fathers are not at risk of being deposed and do not need institutions to rule jointly. The author argues that the creation of formal rules depersonalizes the way in which the regime operates by limiting the leader’s ability to make arbitrary decisions in the future. Meng studies executive term limits and formal succession procedures as indicators of institutionalization written down in constitutions. These mechanisms are particularly important as they provide the elite with state resources to build coalitions and consolidate their power, thus constraining the leader.

To test the argument, the author collects original data on regime institutionalization in 46 sub-Saharan African countries over fifty years. Based on this data, Meng empirically demonstrates that leaders who are weak initially and are forced to establish power-sharing mechanisms such as Felix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d’Ivoire end up surviving much longer in office, and that political regimes in these countries often have multiple leadership transitions. On the other hand, regimes with initially strong leaders such as Guinea under Ahmed Sekou Touré’s leadership may be stable

as long as the leader is in office, but tend to die with its founding leaders, thereby creating instability in the long run.

The book convincingly answers some of comparative authoritarianism's core questions, but at the same time raises new puzzles that might be explored in future research. While the author argues that executive institutions are critical for regime institutionalization, the approach relying on constitutions as the main tool to change the distribution of power does not explain why initially weak leaders institutionalize the regime but remove some of the constraints against them later. For example, there are many cases of term limit evasion, where leaders do not ignore the constitution, but rather use it to legitimize the power shift, such as Paul Kagame in Rwanda and Alvaro Uribe in Colombia. Moreover, the effects of a possible heterogeneity within the elite are not discussed. It might be the case that appointments are made strategically by autocrats and serve to create inequalities within the ruling coalition, which has implications on the power distribution. Loyal elite members would be given important positions while not imposing a threat to the leader's power such as in Putin's Russia.

Another aspect that might be important for power personalization is the degree of public support that an autocratic leader enjoys. Even though Meng concentrates on the elite part of the explanation, especially modern autocrats pay attention to the manipulation of information to persuade citizens of their competence and to gain legitimacy. In a chapter discussing causes of regime institutionalization, Meng compares founding leaders supported by the masses to those who inherited their positions through a close alliance with the outgoing colonial authorities. She concludes that founding leaders are relatively stronger and enjoy higher level of legitimacy. As a result, the ability of weak autocrats to concentrate their power is indirectly associated with the public, which helps to explain why many autocrats today use populist rhetoric. Thus, future research may pay attention to the place of the public defining the strength of a leader.

In summary, Meng offers an explanation for the heterogeneity of institutionalization in autocracies and what consequences it has for leaders' strength and regime survival. For students of modern autocracies and institutions, the book is a must-read. Owing to the author's focus on regime leaders, it is also an important work for scholars interested in personalization and the consolidation of power in authoritarian regimes. Moreover, the work is a good example of the operationalization and measurement of a widely used, but often ambiguous, concept in political science. As such, the author's findings are especially important for our understanding of democratic backsliding and their implications should be further explored by future research.

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