

Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes

By Anne Meng

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Anne Meng presents a convincing case that autocratic leaders who are strong when achieving power, relative to other elites, can rule authoritatively - based on their personal instincts. By contrast, if rival elites are strong relative to the leader and pose a credible threat of a successful rebellion, autocrats need to put executive constraints on their power: which are institutionalized ruled-based systems with certain credible elements to guarantee regime accountability and future rents to these elites, and thus assure their loyalty. These and other findings are based on analysis of governance data mainly from 46 Sub-Saharan African countries starting from their respective year of independence or majority rule, up to 2010. Examples from other regions are also put forward which are found to confirm the overall findings in Africa.

Meng builds upon a formal theory utilizing a rich mix of case studies and statistical analysis to illustrate the evolution and emergence of dictatorships from one man autocracy to institutionalized regimes. The book also discusses the reasons and causes to institutionalize, their measurements, and their consequences upon personalist rule and leadership succession. Meng builds a thesis around the central questions that differentiate this book from the conventional theories of appreciating the nominal characteristics of authoritarian institutions. Meng's approach focuses on the hows and whys of the power structure, constraints, leadership succession rules, the shift from de jure to de facto regimes, and the roles of institutions therein. The author pursues a rigorous theory with multiple types of evidences to link the causes, factors, processes, and consequences of institutionalization. By the vivid application of a mixed-methods approach and case studies to enhance comprehension of the theoretical and technical content in clearly accessible language, power sharing is linked to the durable regime, as lucrative concessions eliminate the chances of struggle for power via coups.

The formal institutional measures that matter most are constitutional succession procedures, which are adopted within the first year of a leader's term and are typically not revoked. These are supported by informal power-sharing measures including appointment of elite leaders to key positions such as prime minister, vice president, and minister of defense and reasonable stability of these appointments. Strong leaders include "founding fathers" that came to power in their newly independent nations on the back of popular social movements and wars of independence, leaders who achieved power at the front of military coups, and leaders with access to natural resource rents. Weaker leaders include those who succeed strong ones and cannot live up to their stellar reputations. This group includes a few designated successors who are selected because they are thought to be weak and lack the influence to depose the present

leader. Some initially strong leaders were “weakened” and moved to adopt institutional constraints after the end of the Cold War, as international governance norms shifted.

Meng goes on to determine whether institutionalized regimes perform better on key outcomes. She finds that institutionalized regimes with constitutional succession rules and informal, elite power-sharing govern for longer periods of time with fewer coup attempts, and are much more likely to achieve peaceful leadership successions. Term limits are less important, as they do not designate a heir apparent.

Meng vividly defines institutionalization as the collection of rules and procedures that structure power and resource distribution, implying specific institutional constraints upon dictatorial authority. This work has similar undertones as found in the theoretical constructs of Paul Schuler, who considers Vietnam’s legislature as exercising effective oversight over the state’s executive body. Meng’s original and empirical theoretical framework also speaks of events as found in China, where the highly personalist and unconstrained regime of founding father Mao transitioned to the more stable authoritarian regime that followed. In another example, the founding father led the Guinea independence movement by decolonizing and then assuming the presidency and accumulating power. Broader movements involved the future opposition circles but they received little institutionalized power once the ruling party took over, as they lacked the required power base to counter authoritarianism. Guinea is a typical case of an initial unconstrained, strong leader who remained in power for a long term, followed by a violent leadership transition.

Other scholars have tried to explain the persistence of authoritarian regimes due to weakness of political parties, weak and coopted democracy, and other factors. A problem posed by these approaches is that the data often depend on expert judgments (e.g., How weak are the parties? Who coopted the democracy?) that are subjective. A strength of Meng’s approach is the use of relative objective measures (e.g., Is there a constitutional provision for succession? Are powerful elites serving in key, top level positions with reasonably stable tenure?).

This book will be of interest to political leaders, statesmen, policy analysts, and scholars interested in African and comparative politics, comparative constitutions, democratization, formal theory, political economy, and presidential power. It addresses the way institutions shape power distribution within the top levels of a dictatorial regime. One man rule can be replaced by a more institutionalized elite autocratic regime in many African political scenarios.

An important conclusion from Meng’s work is that “democratic transitions” are easily exploited and corrupted by autocratic leaders and face high hurdles in successfully constraining these leaders. Other measures such as succession rules and informal elite power sharing have been successfully put in place to constrain authoritarian leaders in many tough-to-govern places.

A limitation of this book lies in treating the autocracy in Africa as a peculiar case, while such dictatorial regimes are common across many continents and countries. A recommendation for future research would be to compare and analyze various autocracies across the globe and highlight their source, nature, antecedents, levels, kinds, mechanism of functioning, and outcomes. Another important step would be to investigate other possible benefits and trade-offs of these institutionalized constraints on autocratic leaders. Does the increased political stability and reduced violence in constrained autocracies lead to greater effectiveness in achieving sustainable development goals and other public goods? Is there some point in the development trajectory (e.g., middle income trap) where a constrained autocracy may be unable to deliver the goods?

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