

talks of the legacy of late-colonial political modernity, Tapscott reads ‘legacies of neopatrimonialism’, and where Mamdani talks of the colonial bifurcated state, Tapscott reads postcolonial neopatrimonial bifurcated state (49f). Wittingly or otherwise, the tendency here is to flatten the diversity of literature on the post-colonial state, and to suppose that all are varieties of neopatrimonialism.

Early in the book, Tapscott rightly notes that ‘arbitrary governance is indeed tied to historical factors, such as the postcolonial nature of the state’ (10). The book’s historical chapter (Chapter 3), however, surprisingly locks the debate to the postcolonial period. If the distinctive feature of the state in Africa is its postcolonial nature, what is the place of colonial political modernity in the emergence of institutionalised arbitrariness? Asking such a question would definitely imply approaching this book’s research object differently, and questioning knowledge produced through a conception of postcolonial temporality as the beginning of time. Overall, if this book’s major downside is its limited historicisation of the state in Uganda, its strength is in its detailed engagement with various manifestations of state power in contemporary Uganda. In the latter, Tapscott makes an important contribution.

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### **Constraining Dictatorship: from personalized rule to institutionalized regimes**

by ANNE MENG

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Why do some dictatorships last much longer than others? Recent scholarship suggests that formal, pseudo-democratic institutions – such as ruling parties, legislatures and elections – produce more durable autocracies. However, most dictatorships have these institutions, yet we still observe wide variation in rates of regime survival. Enter Anne Meng’s book, *Constraining Dictatorship*, which offers a useful corrective to the existing institutionalist take while highlighting often-overlooked variation in elite dynamics across African dictatorships.

Using formal theory, case studies and cross-national data from Sub-Saharan Africa, the book builds on past institutionalist scholarship but persuasively argues that the presence of party or legislative institutions fails to predict leader turnover or regime survival under autocracy. Many authoritarian parties are inherited by leaders, rather than strategically designed, and most fail to outlast the founding leader’s departure. A better predictor of autocratic stability, the book contends, is the presence of ‘explicit executive constraints’ (formal succession policies, term limits and cabinet appointments). Counterintuitively, initially weak autocrats produce stronger regimes because their vulnerable position dictates that they adopt constraints that transfer power and resources to other elites, producing credible commitments that stabilise the dictatorship over the long run. Strong leaders, by contrast, have little need to compromise, but the absence of power sharing weakens the regime after

\* The views expressed are the author’s own and do not necessarily represent the views of the US Government.

the initial dictator leaves office. By unpacking the elite power dynamics that underpin autocratic institutions, Meng usefully moves the authoritarianism literature beyond explanations that often treat institutional choice as exogenous.

Moreover, Meng's account emphasises the wide variation in institutionalisation across Africa, challenging past paradigms that tend to paint African regimes as overwhelmingly personalist or neopatrimonial. Meng's new data on successor policies, term limits and cabinet appointments from 46 African countries – plus short case studies of Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire – help to illustrate how different power distributions and institutional environments emerge in different contexts. The book also boldly suggests that institutionalisation, not democratisation, was 'the real story of Africa in the 1990s' (15): popular uprisings compelled leaders to accept formal limits on their power, which constrained leaders but helped stabilise dictatorships in the long term, helping to explain the continent's halting progress toward democratisation since the 1990s.

Despite these important strides, some questions remain about the causal process undergirding Meng's claims. For example, the observational data use African coup leaders and independence-era 'founding fathers' as proxies for strong dictators, but Meng does not pin down precisely the mechanisms (charisma, popular support, etc.) that give these leaders leverage over elites. Moreover, Meng emphasises that a leader's strength is *relative* to other elites but leaves the source of elites' power underspecified. If institutionalisation requires elites to pose a credible threat to the dictator, how does this threat emerge? One suggestion for future research is to examine how social networks may underpin elite power: whether seeking to sideline a rival, approve/block a policy measure, or oust a dictator via coup or party vote, elites depend on having reliable allies to achieve their aims. Relatedly, additional process-tracing that builds on Meng's case snapshots would help pin down the calculus of dictators and regime elites as they negotiate institutional arrangements. In rather durable dictatorships such as Kenyatta's Kenya or Nyerere's Tanzania, Meng's theory would have predicted that powerful independence-era leaders would *not* have adopted executive constraints. But the fact that both established formal succession rules and filled Vice President and Defence Minister positions – Meng's two key measures of institutionalisation – suggests the need for a closer look at these cases and others, perhaps using archival or other historical materials, to validate or amend the logic presented in the book.

Notwithstanding these quibbles, *Constraining Dictatorship* is a theoretically rich and methodologically impressive contribution to understanding autocratic politics in Africa and beyond.

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**France's Wars in Chad: military intervention and decolonization in Africa**

by NATHANIEL K. POWELL

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The impact of French military interventions on state formation in Chad has been a significant topic of academic research in the social sciences. Powell's argument in