

Leadership Succession in Modern Autocracies

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Abstract:

Under what conditions can dictatorships undergo peaceful leadership transitions? This article argues that constitutional rules and the appointment of a de facto successor play a critical role in promoting peaceful authoritarian succession. It does so through two channels. First, incumbents who plan for succession are less likely to be deposed in a coup. Second, succession planning empowers successors, therefore increasing the likelihood that the incoming leader can take office peacefully. I show evidence of these arguments using original data on constitutional rules and the appointment of de facto successors in 46 African countries from 1960-2010. Regimes that have formal succession rules written into the constitution and leaders who appoint an “heir apparent” are significantly more likely to undergo peaceful leadership transitions.

1. Introduction

Leadership succession has long been considered one of the central challenges of continued authoritarian rule. Herz (1957) famously argued that by grooming a successor, dictators create a “crown-prince problem”, where the designation of an alternative center of power makes them vulnerable to being deposed prematurely by their own chosen successor. However, making no plans for succession can also be destabilizing for autocratic leaders, as the absence of an institutionalized lineage of power increases the likelihood of coups as elites vie for an unclaimed throne. Indeed, many dictators seem to fall prey to this dilemma, and coup d'états are the most common way in which leaders are deposed (Svolik 2012). Yet at the same time, about 40 percent of all leadership transitions in dictatorships from 1946-2010 have been peaceful (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza, 2009). Autocratic regimes such as China and Tanzania have undergone multiple successful leadership transitions and succession is highly regularized. Why are some autocratic regimes able to transfer power peacefully from one leader to another, while other regimes cannot?

This article argues that constitutional rules outlining succession procedures and the appointment of de facto successors play a critical role in promoting peaceful leadership transitions in dictatorships. I argue that succession planning protects outgoing incumbents from coup attempts by eliminating preemptive power grabs that occur when elites anticipate an internal power struggle upon the death of the leader. Since designated successors have a stake in upholding the existing regime, the appointment of such a deputy protects the incumbent against other potential elite challengers. Constitutional rules also empower successors by clearly identifying an heir apparent, which stabilizes

expectations among elites about the anticipated transition. As a result, succession planning also increases the likelihood that the new leader will peacefully take power after the death of outgoing incumbent.

I show evidence of these arguments using original data on constitutional succession rules and the appointment of de facto successors in 46 African countries from 1960-2010. Sub-Saharan Africa is a rich context in which to examine this puzzle because it is a region that is often plagued by coups and violent leader deposals, yet many African leaders have also experienced peaceful transfers of power. Moreover, virtually every country in Africa was authoritarian for decades after independence, and there is much variation in the content of constitutions across countries and over time.

I find that regimes with constitutions that outline specific succession procedures and leaders who designate a de facto successor are significantly less likely to face coup attempts. Such regimes are also significantly more likely to undergo peaceful leadership successions – regardless of whether the regime has a long-standing ruling party. To address potential endogeneity concerns, I run a set of regressions using inherited constitutional rules and obtain similar results. My findings suggest that rather than introducing a “crown prince problem,” succession planning constitutes a key stabilizing force for continue autocratic rule.

This article makes several important contributions to theories of authoritarian survival and leadership transitions. Despite the centrality of the problem of succession for long-run regime stability, the mechanisms that facilitate peaceful transfers of power are not well understood for modern autocracies. Much of the existing literature on autocratic leadership transitions have focused almost exclusively on pre-twentieth century European

monarchies and the role of hereditary succession (Herb 1999; Kurrild-Klitgaard 2000; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014; Tullock 1987, Wang 2017). A small number of studies focusing on non-hereditary solutions to succession argue that ruling parties play an important role in facilitating peaceful transitions (Geddes 1999; Magaloni 2008). In contrast to existing studies, I show that hereditary succession is incredibly rare in modern dictatorships, and that the presence of a ruling party is *not* a predictor of peaceful leadership transitions. Instead, constitutional rules and the appointment of a designated successor are the main mechanisms that regulate leadership transitions in post-World War II autocracies.

Importantly, this article also *disaggregates* two separate aspects of leadership transitions: the peaceful *exit* of the incumbent leader and the peaceful *ascension* of the incoming successor. To the best of my knowledge, all existing research on authoritarian leadership transitions has focused on explaining the peaceful *exit* of the previous leader by showing that succession planning decreases the probability of elite coups (Abramson and Rivera 2016; Frantz and Stein 2016; Kurrild-Klitgaard 2000; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014; Tullock 1987). Yet we lack studies that examine whether succession procedures increases the likelihood that the designated successor will be able to *enter* office peacefully. Ensuring peaceful incumbent exit is only half of the (metaphorical) battle. In many instances, the leader dies peacefully while in office, only to result in violent conflict over the future of the presidency.¹ This article fills this gap by explaining how and why succession planning empowers incoming leaders, leading to peaceful transitions of power.

¹ In this article I will use the terms “dictator”, “authoritarian leader”, and “president” interchangeably.

My findings also have important implications for African politics. Existing scholarship on leadership succession in Sub-Saharan Africa has generally held a pessimistic view about the prospect of peaceful and constitutional transitions, especially in the decades prior to democratization in the early 1990s. Coups have long been considered the modal type of leadership change in Africa, and this was particularly true during the Cold War era (Decalo 1976, McGowan 2003). In fact, an early article on leadership transitions in Africa by Sylla (1982) even referred to the challenge of succession as the “Gordian Knot of African Politics.” In their influential volume on autocratic politics in Africa, Jackson and Rosberg (1982) predicted that leadership succession will continue to be resolved by informal (and often violent) power politics, rather than institutionalized rules. By contrast, this article demonstrates that not all leadership transitions that take place within autocracies in Sub-Saharan Africa are unregulated or driven solely by violence. Rather than serving as empty parchment institutions, constitutional rules can play an important role in structuring and regulating the transmission of executive authority, even during the most authoritarian decades of rule.

2. Succession Planning in Modern Dictatorships

There have been surprisingly few studies documenting how modern autocracies govern leadership transitions. Despite scholarly focus on monarchies and hereditary succession, familial transfers of power are incredibly rare in post-World War II dictatorships. Only seven percent of all autocratic regimes from 1946-2010 are coded as monarchies, and out of those monarchies, only two remain in power today (Geddes,

Wright, Frantz 2014). Even in non-monarchal regimes, less than *three* percent of direct power transfers (whether peaceful or not) occur between family members. In general, family ties in authoritarian leaders are surprisingly rare. Only six percent of all autocratic leaders worldwide have any family ties with earlier incumbents (author's calculations based on data from Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza, 2009).² If hereditary succession does not govern the transmission of power, what are the mechanisms that regulate leadership succession in modern autocracies?

Modern dictatorships typically use two strategies to regulate leadership transitions. The first strategy is the creation of a formal constitutional rule specifying the succession order in the case of the incumbent's death or departure from office. The Kenyan³ constitution (Chapter II, Part I, Section 6), for example, includes a clause that states:

- (1) If the office of President becomes vacant by reason of the death or resignation of the President...an election of a President shall be held within the period of ninety days immediately following the occurrence of the vacancy.
- (2) While the office of the President is vacant, the functions of that office shall be exercised –
 - a. By the Vice President

The rule dictates that the Vice President would serve as the interim leader if the office of the presidency were to become vacant, therefore designating the Vice President as the legal successor to the president. Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, took power when the country was granted independence in 1963. In 1967, Kenyatta named Daniel arap Moi as his vice president – a position that Moi served for 11 years. Upon

² For instance, Lee Hsien Loong, the current prime minister of Singapore, came into office in 2004. His father, Lee Kuan Yew, left office in 1990.

³ This constitutional rule was created in 1963 and remains in place today.

Kenyatta's death in 1978, Moi became the interim president, as dictated by the constitution, and was sworn in as the president the following month.

A number of recent studies have highlighted the role of constitutions and formal rules in supporting autocratic rule (Albertus and Menaldo 2012; Ginsburg and Simpser 2014). Constitutional rules are publicly observable, allowing elites to condition their behavior and credibly threaten to punish leaders who violate their promises. Autocratic constitutions are most helpful when they can serve as “focal points” for elites by reducing ambiguity around a clear set of rules and enforcement behavior (Albertus and Menaldo 2012; Hadfield and Weingast 2013). In fact, Ginsburg and Simpser (2014) argue that constitutional documents may even be especially helpful in autocracies because the creation of clear and observable rules ease coordination problems and create a self-enforcing system – one that can operate in the absence of a strong judicial system.

A second key strategy for succession planning is the appointment of a “second in command” deputy – frequently a vice president or a prime minister. In countries with constitutional succession rules, vice presidents and prime ministers are commonly designated as the interim president in the event of the death or incapacitation of the president. Even in countries without such a constitutional rule, these offices are frequently seen as clear stepping-stones to the presidency. Within Sub-Saharan Africa, the vice president or prime minister position is the most commonly held office for future presidents (author). Ahmadou Ahidjo, the founding president of Cameroon, for instance, named Paul Biya as his Prime Minister in 1975 – a position was that also the constitutionally designated successor. In 1982, after being in office for 22 years, Ahidjo retired from the presidency and passed power down to Biya, who remains in power today.

It is important to note that the designation of an informal successor can occur *without* the presence of a constitutional rule. Succession planning does not necessarily have to take place on paper. Even when the constitution does not specify a succession order, the “second in command” is commonly understood to be the heir apparent of the president. Gabon under its first president, Leon M’ba, did not have a clear constitutional rule specifying the succession order. However, M’ba did appoint a vice president, Omar Bongo, who successfully ascended to the presidency upon M’ba’s death in 1967. As Jackson and Rosberg (1982) argue, “it is probably true that Bongo’s own political skills served him well during the transitional period, but this does not gainsay the fact that he was M’Ba’s personally selected [heir] and that he benefitted from the approval and legitimacy that such selection bestowed” (72).

3. Mechanisms of Peaceful Leadership Transitions

What are the mechanisms that link succession planning to peaceful leadership transitions? I argue that succession planning promotes peaceful transitions in two distinct ways: by ensuring the peaceful *exit* of the incumbent and the successful *ascension* of the incoming leader. Building on existing studies, I argue that autocratic leaders plan for succession, not necessarily out of concern for the stability of the regime after their death, but because appointing a successor reduces incentives for other elites to preemptively take power through coercion. I also describe how constitutional rules and the designation of a “second-in-command” empowers the elite who is appointed to that position, increasing the likelihood of a peaceful transition.

Peaceful Exits: Why dictators plan for succession

Why would a dictator care about the transfer of power that occurs after his reign? It turns out that the problem of how to extend executive authority to another elite is a concern not only to others in the regime, but also to the dictator himself. As Herz (1957) so aptly summarizes: It “colors, in anticipation, so to speak, *the entire situation during the dictator’s life and rule*. To the dictator it poses a problem and constitutes a danger. To his aids it is a temptation” (20, emphasis added). Autocratic leaders plan for succession not necessarily because they care about future regime stability, but in order to stabilize their own rule.

Scholars originally believed that dictators were quite wary of naming formal successors due to the “crown-prince problem”. Herz famously argued that by grooming a successor, incumbents create their own worst enemy. The mere designation of an alternative center of power makes leaders vulnerable to being deposed prematurely by their own chosen successor. According to Herz, by naming a successor, the ruler voluntarily shifts the center of power away from himself, putting himself at risk of being deposed by his own appointee.

Yet *not* planning for succession is also equally dangerous for the regime as well as the dictator. When autocratic leaders die without designating a successor, a coordination problem is likely to emerge among regime elites because it is not clear who the de facto successor should be (Kokkonen and Sundell 2014). Such power vacuums in the aftermath of the death of the leader often invite coups (Frantz and Stein 2016) or even civil wars (Kokkonen and Sundell 2019) as elites vie for the incumbency. In other words, leaders actually endanger themselves by not planning for succession. In the absence of an

institutionalized succession order, elites may be incentivized to *preemptively* try to take power through coercion in anticipation of eventual conflict over succession. Indeed, many dictators seem to fall prey to this dilemma, as the majority of autocratic leaders from 1946-2008 have been deposed via non-constitutional means (Svolik 2012).

Furthermore, appointed successors provide an additional “barrier effect” for leaders. When leaders appoint a “second in command,” this deputy becomes incentivized to protect the existing regime order in order to ensure their own future ascension to power. The designated successor therefore “constitutes an additional hurdle for contenders who aim at taking over the power from the incumbent” (Konrad and Mui 2017, 2159). Designated successors have an incentive to protect the incumbent and existing regime, since preserving the status quo is the best guarantee that they will become the next incumbent. Once named, successors can also start to build their own alliances, in anticipation of the leadership transition. Therefore, a clear line of succession protects the regime from other potential elite challengers.

A natural question that emerges is why the crown prince problem does *not* materialize when a successor is appointed. By naming a successor, the leader voluntarily shifts power away from himself, in favor of his appointee. According to Herz’s logic, succession planning empowers the “prince”, who then becomes a credible opponent to the leader. However, recent studies have underscored that power-sharing deals between leaders and elites are credible *only when* elites possess a credible threat of rebellion (Boix and Svolik 2013, Myerson 2008). In this sense, the crown prince dynamic actually *helps* to keep leaders in power by creating a credible mechanism for power-sharing.

Moreover, presidents would often purposely appoint successors who they believed were not able to unilaterally depose them. In the case of Kenya, for instance, when Moi was vice president, he was not perceived to be a particularly shrewd politician, and in fact elites would sometimes make “Moi jokes” behind his back (Bienen and van de Walle 1991, 6). Under these circumstances, the designated appointee would be incentivized to wait patiently for the incumbent to die or retire, rather than try to capture power preemptively through a coup. In fact, there is no instance in Sub-Saharan Africa where a designated successor preemptively overthrew the incumbent (author).

It is helpful to address concerns about endogeneity here. Identifying the effect of institutions that are not randomly assigned is a difficult and endemic problem in the study of authoritarian politics (Pepinsky 2014). In the context of this article, readers may wonder whether the underlying dynamics motivating elites to create succession policies in the first place is driving transition outcomes, rather than the institutions themselves.

To address these concerns, we must first ask under what conditions do leaders create succession policies? We can roughly break down the question into two possible scenarios: *strong* leaders create succession policies or *weak* leaders create succession policies. On one hand, it is possible that leaders who are extremely strong and anticipate having a peaceful transition are the only actors who feel secure enough to create explicit succession policies. If this is the case, then the relationship between succession policies and peaceful transitions is simply a reflection of the regime’s stability and not the independent effect of institutions on leadership transitions.

However, a leader who is *already* secure and anticipates a smooth succession has no reason to create succession policies since a peaceful transition is possible *without*

institutions. In fact, existing studies of endogenous institutional creation argues that it is *weak* leaders who create power-sharing institutions in order to buy support from other elites (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix and Svobik 2013; Gandhi 2008). Strong leaders who do not face a credible threat of removal can remain in power whether they create institutions or not.

We should therefore expect incumbents who are *most likely* to experience *violent* transitions to create succession policies. In fact, this logic also answers the question: if planning for succession promotes regime durability, then why don't all dictators plan for succession? Leaders who feel quite secure in their positions are less likely to formalize succession procedures because such incumbents are not at risk of being deposed, even if they do not designate a line of succession. Though succession procedures are indeed endogenous creations, these policies are created by leaders who are inherently the *least* likely to have peaceful transitions. The strategic logic of institutional creation thus alleviates concerns that the observed effects of institutions are merely reflections of underlying power dynamics, rather than the effect of succession planning.

It also is important to note that peaceful leadership transitions are an *unintended consequence* of incumbents' self-interested desire to stay in power. Leaders plan for succession not necessarily out of concern for the stability of the regime after they die (although some may), but because they do not want to be preemptively deposed by elites who will compete for the presidency in the absence of a designated successor. Although incumbents make succession plans in order to stabilize their own rule, these self-interested actions *happen* to benefit the successor, who, once appointed, has every

incentive to remain loyal to the current regime. In turn, these self-reinforcing succession plans also promote regime stability in the long run.

Peaceful Ascension: Empowering Successors

Beyond protecting outgoing incumbents, succession planning also promotes the peaceful ascension of incoming leaders. Constitutions empower successors by clearly identifying the interim president, which stabilizes expectations among elites about the anticipated transition. When a leader dies, key regime actors, such as cabinet members, the courts, and the military, rely on formal institutions to coordinate their response. Constitutions serve as especially powerful signals especially in times of heightened uncertainty after the death of a leader or unexpected vacancy of the presidency (Albertus and Menaldo 2012, Ginsberg and Simpser 2014).

Formal rules that identify a clear procedure following the departure of the leader eliminate ambiguity around the succession order. Like constitutional rules, the appointment of a “second in command” sets expectations about the anticipated successor, allowing elites to coordinate around a focal point. Moreover, constitutions bestow a key sense of legitimacy and legality to the successor, which protects them from other elite challengers who wish to vie for power. The 2012 transition from President Bingu wa Mutharika to his Vice President and constitutional successor, Joyce Banda, in Malawi illustrates this mechanism. Upon Mutharika’s death in 2012, opposing factions tried to contest Banda’s ascension to the presidency. However, these attempts failed primarily because the courts and military supported Banda as the constitutionally designated successor (Cammack 2012; Dionne and Dulani 2012).

Even when a constitutional succession rule does not exist, the appointment of a “second in command” creates a strong signal as to who the anticipated successor will be. Once tapped, the successor can begin to establish a support base and consolidate his authority prior to the transition. The office of the vice president or prime minister provides the appointed elite with “an enormous advantage in consolidating his power. His constitutional authority places immediate patronage in his hands and this is used to reward allies and eliminate rivals” (Hughes and May 1988, 14). This is especially true if the “second in command” begins to perform functions associated with the office of the president, such as leading cabinet meetings or conducting official state visits to other countries. Anointed deputies often also benefit, by extension, from the popularity or legitimacy of the incumbent. They are often publicly groomed for office and portrayed as the incumbent’s protégé (Zeng 2019, 6).

Once the succession order has been established, elites are incentivized to support the future incumbent in order to continue receiving benefits and rents from the existing regime. Although the appointment of a “second in command” deputy eliminates the possibility for other elites to assume the top post, “the victims of this arrangement are relatively few compared with the number of beneficiaries of an orderly succession” (Zeng 2019, 6). Moreover, the appointment of the “second in command” to a key cabinet position, such as the office of the Vice President or Prime Minister provides the successor access to material resources and influence, shifting power in favor of the designated successor. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for other regime elites to successfully challenge the appointed deputy.

To illustrate this mechanism, we return to the example of the first transition of power in Kenya. Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, appointed Daniel arap Moi as his vice president and constitutionally designated successor in 1967. In 1976, a faction who opposed Moi proposed that the constitutional succession rule be changed so that the vice president would not serve as the interim president. Moi responded by obtaining statements of support from 88 MPs, 10 cabinet ministers, the Attorney General, and critically – Kenyatta himself (Karimi and Ochieng 1980, 19-25; Tamarkin 1979, 24; Widner 1992, 115-117). The proposal to change the constitutional rule quickly failed.

In this case, the presence of formal succession rules acted as a critical barrier against attempts by other elites to dethrone the appointed successor. Kenyatta's influence also played a key role in supporting Moi's claims to the office. As Tamarkin (1979) effectively summarizes: "The anti-Moi group suffered a severe setback in its first attempt to assert itself. If they thought of pursuing their struggle they would have to do it against the backdrop of a grim political reality and with a debilitating constitutional constraint" (24).

4. Data and Descriptive Statistics

This article has argued that succession planning in the form of constitutional succession rules and the appointment of a "second in command" deputy increases the probability of peaceful leadership transitions. In particular, I argue that succession planning decreases the likelihood that the incumbent leader will be deposed in a coup, while increasing the likelihood that the incoming leader will take power peacefully. I now conduct empirical tests of my arguments using original data on succession planning and

leadership transitions in all authoritarian regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa from 1960 to 2010.⁴

Dependent Variable

There are three dependent variables in the empirical analysis. The first dependent variable, *Peaceful Transition*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the leadership transition is peaceful. I use the following rules to identify peaceful leadership transitions. First, I require that a leader must have an immediate successor following their departure from office. To evaluate this, I use the “start date” and “end date” variables available from Archigos. Second, I require that the method of exit for the incumbent and method of entry for the successor both be coded as “regular” by Archigos.⁵ In other words, in order for the transition to be coded as peaceful, the incumbent cannot have been deposed through a coup or civil war. The successor must take office immediately following the departure of the previous incumbent, and the successor cannot come to power using military force or foreign imposition.

⁴ Because my theory focuses on authoritarian leadership transitions, I drop country-years that are coded as democracy for at least a ten-year period by Cheibub et. al. (2010). Most African states have been and continue to be authoritarian, and only 11 countries exit the sample after 1991.

⁵ Archigos breaks down leader exit into the following main categories: assassination, popular protest, removed by military, removed by other government actors, removed by rebels, removed through threat of foreign force, regular, still in office. I consider all exit codes other than assassination, regular, and still in office as an instance of “irregular” leader exit. I exclude assassination from my list of irregular leader exits because Archigos codes assassination attempts only by unsupported individuals. U.S. presidents, for instance, have been assassinated but were peacefully succeeded by their vice presidents. For leader entry, Archigos uses the following categories: foreign imposition, irregular, regular, unknown. I only consider cases coded as “regular” as peaceful entry.

An example of a peaceful leadership succession is when power was transferred from Jomo Kenyatta to Daniel arap Moi in Kenya. Kenyatta died on August 22, 1978 and Moi took office that day – both are coded as regular entry in Archigos. Another example of a peaceful transition is subsequently when power was transferred from Ahmadou Ahidjo to Paul Biya in Cameroon. Ahidjo retired due to ill health on November 6, 1982 and Biya took office that same day. On the other hand, from 1960 through 1970, Benin experienced six leadership changes – all of which were driven by coups. Finally, a number of incumbents were in power through the end of the dataset in 2010, and I exclude such observations from the analysis in this section. Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon is such an example.

The second dependent variable, *Leader Deposed in Coup*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the incumbent was deposed in a military coup (data retrieved from Archigos). The third dependent variable, *Peaceful Successor*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the incoming leader took power peacefully (data retrieved from Archigos).

Independent Variables

My main argument is that constitutional rules specifying succession procedures and the appointment of a “second in command” play an important role in facilitating peaceful leadership transitions. To test this argument, I collected original data on

constitutional succession rules and cabinet appointments in 46 African countries between 1960-2010.⁶

For succession rules, I created a time-series dummy variable that takes a value of one for the years in which each country in my dataset had a constitutional rule specifying procedures for replacing the president in the case of death or incapacitation. These procedures specify who would be the interim successor in the case of the departure or death of the president. The Botswana constitution, for instance, includes the following provision in the constitution: “In the event of the death or resignation of the President, the Vice-President will automatically assume the Presidency.” Cases that score a zero for this variable do not have a rule specifically addressing succession. Importantly, I only consider succession rules that were in place in the years leading up to the leadership transition. If, for example, a leader had succession rules at the start of his tenure, but then eliminated them before exiting office, then these rules would not have been in place to facilitate the transition. The variable, *Succession Rules*, records the number of years during the leader’s tenure leading up to the transition for which constitutional succession rules were in place.

I also evaluate whether appointing a “second in command” has an effect on the likelihood of peaceful transitions. In Sub-Saharan Africa, vice presidents and prime ministers are commonly known to be the heir apparent. In fact, 41 percent of autocratic successors previously held the vice president or prime minister position before becoming the incumbent (author). However, I also take into account the stability of this cabinet

⁶ The data for this article were hand coded using the Europa World Year Book over a period of twelve months with a team of seven research assistants. To ensure accuracy, the variables were coded twice and, when available, crosschecked using the Comparative Constitutions Project.

position. African leaders routinely practiced the “revolving door” policy of constantly rotating important cabinet ministers in order to prevent any one person from amassing too much power (Dickie and Rake 1973; Jackson and Rosberg 1982). In coding this variable, I focus only on vice president and prime minister appointments that are *stable*.

An example is helpful here. Consider Seretse Khama, who was the first president of Botswana from 1966 to 1980. Quett Masire was appointed as the vice president throughout Khama’s entire tenure, and in fact succeeded Khama to become the next president. In this case, Masire had a stable vice president for 14 years during his tenure. On the other hand, Idriss Deby, who has been the president of Chad since 1991, has been rotating his vice presidents practically on a yearly basis since taking power. From 1991 to 2005, Deby named 10 different vice presidents. There have only been five years for which the vice presidency was held by the same person as the previous year during Deby’s tenure.

As an indicator of a stable “second in command” appointment, I create a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the person in the vice president or prime minister position is the same person as the year before. The variable, *Second in Command*, records the number of years of the incumbent’s tenure in which the vice president or prime minister was the same person as the previous year.

In addition to my main hypotheses about succession planning, I test existing arguments surrounding hereditary succession and ruling parties. The variable, *Family Ties*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the transfer of power occurs between two family members (Archigos). I include blood ties and ties via marriage and do not exclude irregular transfers of power. For data on ruling parties, I merge the time-series

version of my dataset on transitions with the Institutions dataset from Svobik (2012).

Using the “lpname” party variable from Svobik, I create the variable, ***Ruling party***, which documents the number of years the leader had a ruling party prior to the leadership transition.

I also include a number of additional leader and country-level controls. The variable, ***Constitution***, records the percentage of years for which the incumbent had a constitution in place in order to separate out the effect of simply having a constitution from having specific succession policies and term limits in place. The variable, ***Years in Power***, denotes the number of years the leader was in office. For many model specifications, I also include a number of country-level control variables, including GDP per capita, oil production, population size, a measure of ethnic fractionalization, a Cold War dummy, and colonial controls.⁷

Descriptive Statistics

The resulting data includes 106 leadership transitions that occurred between 1960 and 2010 in Sub-Saharan Africa. Out of these transitions, 41 were peaceful and 65 were not.⁸ As documented by the literature on authoritarian rule, smooth leadership transitions do not occur easily – only 39 percent of the transitions in this sample were peaceful.

A number of interesting descriptive findings emerge from the data. The first striking observation is that *hereditary succession in Sub-Saharan Africa is surprisingly rare*. Only four percent of power transfers (whether peaceful or not) occur between

⁷ These control variables are calculated as the mean value of the variable for the leader’s tenure.

⁸ 19 leaders were still in power as of 2010, I exclude these leaders from the analysis.

family members.⁹ Out of these 9 cases, 4 were peaceful,¹⁰ and 4 were not,¹¹ and one leader is still in power. This finding is similar to patterns of hereditary succession in the global sample of all authoritarian regimes. Out of all autocratic leadership transitions that occurred between 1946 and 2016, power was handed between family members less than *three* percent of the time (calculated using the Archigos dataset).

Even family “dynasties” occur very infrequently – in my sample of African leaders, only six percent of leaders have any family ties with earlier incumbents.¹² Once again, this statistic mirrors general patterns of family dynasties found in the global sample of all autocratic leaders. Summary statistics of all variables are reported in Appendix Table 1.

5. Empirical Analysis

The empirical analysis is broken down into two main parts. First, I provide empirical evidence of my main argument: that succession planning promotes peaceful leadership transitions. Second, I evaluate the mechanisms linking succession planning to peaceful transitions by examining incumbent exit and new leader entrance separately. I show that leaders who plan for succession are less likely to be deposed in a coup and that

⁹ It is useful to recall that I am using a broad definition of the term “family” – I include relatives who are related by marriage, in addition to blood relations.

¹⁰ For instance, in 1999, Ismail Omar Guelleh came to power as the president of Djibouti, following his uncle Hassan Gouled Aptidon, who had been the first president of Djibouti from 1977 to 1999. Guelleh was the handpicked successor of Aptidon and took over when his uncle retired.

¹¹ For example, in 1966, Jean-Bedel Bokassa seized power from David Dacko in the Central African Republic in a military coup. Bokassa was Dacko’s uncle.

¹² By family “dynasty” I am referring to leaders who have a familial connection with an earlier incumbent, but did not immediately come into office following the family member. For instance, Ian Khama, the current president of Botswana, came into office in 2008. His father, Sereste Khama, left office in 1980.

succession planning increases the likelihood that the incoming leader will take power peacefully.

Does succession planning promote peaceful leadership transitions?

I examine whether succession planning increases the likelihood of peaceful transitions. For this analysis, the main dependent variable is *Peaceful Transition*, and the main independent variables are *Succession Rules* and *Second in Command*. I use a logit model and clustered standard errors at the country level for all model specifications.

Table 1 reports results of the logit analysis. The presence of constitutional succession rules and the appointment of a “second in command” are both positively and significantly associated with peaceful transitions, and this effect is robust across various model specifications. Moreover, the size of these effects is not trivial. Appendix Figure 1 presents graphs of the marginal effect of constitutional succession rules and the appointment of a “second in command” on the likelihood of a peaceful transition. As the number of years a leader has a constitutional successor policy increases from zero to 35, the predicted probability of a peaceful transition jumps from .3 to almost 1. The size of the effect of appointing a “second in command” is similar in magnitude.

Despite existing scholarly literature suggesting that ruling parties play an important role in regulating leadership succession, this variable does not appear to have a significant effect in any model specifications in Table 1. In fact, *Ruling Party* is *never* significant in any subsequent models or robustness checks. I exclude the *Family Ties* variable from the main analysis because there are so few cases, and when included, this variable is also never significant.

Table 1: Does succession planning promote peaceful leadership transitions?

| DV: Peaceful transition | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Succession rules | 0.134* (0.054) | 0.178** (0.057) | 0.142* (0.062) |
| Second in command | 0.196** (0.069) | 0.280** (0.095) | 0.228* (0.100) |
| Years in power | | -0.047 (0.104) | 0.035 (0.112) |
| Constitution | | -0.055 (0.122) | -0.099 (0.140) |
| Ruling party | | 0.035 (0.085) | 0.031 (0.086) |
| GDP per capita | | | 0.861* (0.379) |
| Oil production | | | -0.035 (0.449) |
| Population | | | 0.293 (0.244) |
| Ethnic frac | | | 0.455 (1.390) |
| Cold War | | | -1.068 (0.626) |
| British | | | 0.000 (0.771) |
| French | | | -0.568 (0.795) |
| Constant | -1.873*** (0.384) | -1.548** (0.550) | -4.874 (2.522) |
| Observations | 106 | 106 | 101 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.235 | 0.262 | 0.386 |

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses.

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

One potential concern is that parties may be especially weak in Sub-Saharan Africa – particularly during the early decades immediately following independence. To show that the absence of a party effect is not simply an artifact of weak parties in Africa, I analyze a global sample of leadership transitions from 1946-2008 and find that the

presence of a ruling party does not increase the likelihood of a peaceful leadership transition. In fact, I also find that a hereditary transfer of power also does not have a significant effect on the global sample of leadership changes. Appendix Table 2 reports these results.

These findings remain consistent over a number of other robustness checks. First, we may be concerned that regimes without constitutions at all are extremely personalist or have particularly weak institutions. I therefore rerun the analysis on a subset of the data that excludes observations that do *not* have constitutions (in other words, only units that have constitutions for the entire period are included in this analysis). This analysis compares observations with constitutions that have a succession rule against observations with constitutions that do *not* have a succession rule. The results, reported in Appendix Table 3, remain consistent. The presence of formal succession rules and the appointment of a “second in command” continue to be significantly associated with peaceful transfers of power.

Second, I rerun the analysis using dummy variable versions of my independent variable. Cases in which there was a constitutional succession rule and a “second in command” appointed the year before the transition occurred score a 1, cases in which these arrangements did not exist in the year prior to the transition score a 0. The results, reported in Appendix Table 4, remain consistent with the main analysis.

Third, we may be concerned that my results are being driven purely by institutions that were created after the end of the Cold War. To address this concern, I rerun the analysis on leadership transitions that occurred prior to 1991. The results, reported in Appendix Table 5, remain consistent. The presence of a constitutional

succession rule and the appointment of a “second in command” are positively associated with peaceful leadership transitions during the Cold War, suggesting that these mechanisms were effective even during the most authoritarian decades.

To address concerns about endogenous institutional creation, I run a set of models using *inherited* constitutional rules. As discussed earlier, since institutions are not assigned at random, the reader may be concerned that the relationship between constitutional rules and peaceful succession is endogenous. To deal with this concern, I consider cases where the leader *inherited* formal rules about succession, rather than creating them.

I create new variable, ***Inherited Succession Rules***, which takes a value of 1 only if the constitutional succession rule was *already in place* when the leader came into power. In Malawi, for example, succession policies were created after Hastings Banda had already been in office for twelve years – he therefore did not inherit succession policies. The president who succeeded Banda, Bakili Muluzi, however, did inherit succession policies – therefore under this coding scheme, this variable takes a value of one for Muluzi but not for Banda. Results from the analysis using inherited constitutional rules are reported in Table 2.¹³ The results remain consistent. Succession rules that are inherited by incumbents are significantly associated with peaceful transfers of power.¹⁴

¹³ For this analysis, I drop transitions from the founding president to the second leader because founding presidents do not have the opportunity to inherit constitutional rules from a previous leader.

¹⁴ Another possible strategy, following existing studies, could have been to focus on natural or sudden leader deaths (for instance, see Olken and Jones 2005). However within the Africa sample this strategy is not feasible because there are not enough cases for empirical testing. Of all African leaders in my sample, 8 were assassinated and 15 died of natural causes. Moreover, elites frequently plan for succession in anticipation of the death

Table 2: Inherited Constitutional Rules

| DV: | (1) | (2) |
|----------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Peaceful transition | | |
| Inherited succession rules | 0.229** (0.088) | 0.264* (0.118) |
| Years in power | 0.034 (0.089) | 0.113 (0.092) |
| Constitution | 0.011 (0.097) | -0.070 (0.138) |
| Ruling party | | 0.001 (0.101) |
| GDP per capita | | 0.307 (0.269) |
| Oil production | | 0.429 (0.253) |
| Population | | 0.353 (0.219) |
| Ethnic frac | | 0.058 (1.463) |
| British | | 0.754 (0.707) |
| French | | 0.031 (0.733) |
| Constant | -1.398** (0.458) | -5.752* (2.355) |
| Observations | 67 | 64 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.137 | 0.272 |

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses.
 *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Mechanisms: Disaggregating incumbent exit and successor entrance

Next, I turn to the mechanisms and show empirically that succession planning promotes peaceful incumbent exit as well as peaceful successor ascension to power. I conduct survival analysis to evaluate whether succession planning promotes the peaceful exit of the outgoing leader, particularly focusing on whether the incumbent is deposed in

of an aging leader. Therefore the institutional configuration upon the death of a leader is often not random.

Table 3: Does succession planning promote peaceful incumbent exit?

| DV: Leader deposed in coup | (1) | (2) |
|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Succession rules | 0.930** (0.032) | 0.934** (0.032) |
| Second in Command | 0.855*** (0.038) | 0.858*** (0.044) |
| Constitution | 0.892*** (0.024) | 0.897*** (0.029) |
| Ruling party | | 0.972 (0.036) |
| GDP per capita | | 0.843 (0.167) |
| Oil production | | 1.161 (0.286) |
| Population | | 0.795* (0.097) |
| Ethnic frac | | 0.970 (0.483) |
| Observations | 206 | 193 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.165 | 0.170 |

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, and hazard ratios are reported. Hazard ratios that are *less* than 1 indicate a lower risk of being forcibly deposed. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

a coup. The main dependent variable in this analysis is *Leader Deposed in Coup*, and I use a Cox proportional hazard model. Table 3 presents results from the survival analysis, and hazard ratios are reported. Since the dependent variable takes a value of 1 if the leader was deposed in a coup, hazard ratios that are *less* than 1 indicate a lower risk of being forcibly deposed, while hazard ratios that are greater than 1 indicate a higher risk of being forcibly deposed.

I find that leaders who have constitutional succession procedures and appoint a “second in command” are significantly less likely to be violently deposed. The presence of a ruling party does not appear to have a significant effect in preventing coups. These

results are consistent with other studies that find that institutionalized succession procedures protect regimes against coup attempts (Frantz and Stein 2016) as well as the outbreak of civil wars rooted in succession conflict (Kokkonen and Sundell 2017).

Finally, I examine whether succession planning increases the likelihood that the incoming leader will take power peacefully. The main dependent variable for this analysis, *Peaceful Successor*, takes a value of 1 if the incoming leader entered office peacefully. Importantly, the analysis only includes observations *where the outgoing incumbent exited office peacefully*.¹⁵ Unfortunately, conditioning on peaceful incumbent exit reduces the number of observations quite significantly, so I limit the number of control variables used in these regressions. I use a logit model with clustered standard errors at the country level for this analysis, which is reported in Table 4.

I find that, conditioning on peaceful incumbent exit, incoming leaders are significantly more likely to ascend to the presidency peacefully if the regime has constitutional succession rules in place. The appointment of a “second in command” continues to be positively associated with peaceful successor entrance to power, although this variable is not significant. These findings suggest that succession planning does indeed empower successors, allowing them to ascend to the presidency peacefully – a critical component of successful leadership transitions.

6. Conclusion

This article examined the conditions under which peaceful leadership successions can occur in autocracies. Using original data on autocratic transitions in Sub-Saharan

¹⁵ If we do not condition on peaceful incumbent exit, then this analysis would be identical to the regressions presented in Table 1.

Table 4: Does succession planning increase the likelihood that the incoming leader will take power peacefully?

| DV: Peaceful successor | (1) | (2) |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Succession rules | 0.539* (0.213) | 0.573* (0.276) |
| Second in command | 0.030 (0.051) | 0.253 (0.139) |
| Years in power | | -0.202 (0.132) |
| Constitution | | -0.005 (0.122) |
| Constant | 1.240 (0.824) | 2.647 (1.607) |
| Observations | 42 | 42 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.244 | 0.398 |

Note: Sample includes only transitions where the incumbent exited office peacefully.

Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses.

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Africa, I show that succession planning can play an important role in regulating the peaceful transition of power. In particular, I disaggregate the leadership transition process and show that succession planning promotes the peaceful exit of the outgoing incumbent as well as the peaceful ascension of the new leader.

The results show that leaders who plan for succession are significantly less likely to be deposed in a coup and regimes that have constitutional succession rules and “second in command” deputies are significantly more likely to undergo peaceful leadership transitions. This holds true regardless of whether the regime has a long-standing ruling party. Altogether, the results suggest that rather than introducing the crown prince problem, planning for leadership succession in African autocracies seems to be a stabilizing force for continued autocratic rule. Importantly, I show that these measures

can be effective, even within Sub-Saharan Africa, where institutions are commonly portrayed to be weak and ineffectual.

Although the theoretical arguments presented in this paper extend beyond regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa, future studies can collect data on constitutional rules and cabinet appointments from other regions of the world. Although the literature on authoritarian regimes has focused extensively on the actions of leaders, there have been surprisingly few studies on the executive branch – particularly presidential cabinets. Similarly, studies of authoritarian institutions have only recently begun studying the effects of constitutions on autocratic stability. By further examining the content of autocratic constitutions, scholars can continue to understand the conditions under which institutions shape regime outcomes in dictatorships.

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APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1: Summary Statistics

| Variable | N | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---------------------|-----|------|------|------|------|
| Peaceful transition | 106 | .386 | .489 | 0 | 1 |
| Succession rules | 106 | 2.79 | 5.08 | 0 | 24 |
| Second in command | 106 | 3.73 | 5.23 | 0 | 35 |
| Years in power | 106 | 8.50 | 8.20 | 1 | 41 |
| Constitution | 106 | 6.84 | 7.87 | 0 | 41 |
| Family ties | 106 | .043 | .205 | 0 | 1 |
| Party years | 106 | 4.37 | 4.37 | 0 | 27 |
| GDP per capita | 101 | 1.29 | 1.61 | .160 | 11.1 |
| Oil production | 101 | .250 | 1.13 | 0 | 11.8 |
| Population | 101 | 8.71 | 1.17 | 6.16 | 11.6 |
| Ethnic frac | 101 | .664 | .240 | .035 | .925 |

Appendix Table 2: Global Sample

| DV: Peaceful transitions | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Family ties | 0.778 (0.560) | 0.824 (0.535) | 1.811 (0.969) |
| Ruling party | 0.008 (0.020) | 0.011 (0.020) | -0.027 (0.044) |
| Constant | -2.936*** (0.720) | -3.130*** (0.675) | -3.147** (1.183) |
| Observations | 456 | 456 | 347 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.0613 | 0.0946 | 0.148 |
| Country FE | No | No | Yes |
| Region controls | No | Yes | No |

Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

This sample includes all leadership transitions that have occurred in all dictatorships in the world (as defined by Cheibub et al 2010). The family ties variable was retrieved from the Archigos dataset, and the ruling party variable was retrieved from Svoboda (2012).

Appendix Table 3: Only units with constitutions

| DV: peaceful transition | (1) | (2) |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Succession rules | 0.193** (0.067) | 0.203** (0.072) |
| Second in command | 0.274* (0.108) | 0.254** (0.092) |
| Years in power | -0.085 (0.065) | -0.087 (0.071) |
| Ruling party | | 0.093 (0.092) |
| GDP per capita | | 1.120* (0.474) |
| Oil production | | -0.465 (0.442) |
| Population | | 0.222 (0.225) |
| Ethnic frac | | 0.779 (2.255) |
| Constant | -1.592* (0.756) | -5.575* (2.411) |
| Observations | 65 | 62 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.280 | 0.428 |

Note: Units without constitutions for the entire period are excluded from this analysis.

Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Appendix Table 4: Dummy variable version of independent variables

| DV: peaceful transition | (1) | (2) |
|---------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Succession rules (dummy) | 1.043* (0.496) | 1.032 (0.534) |
| Second in command (dummy) | 2.232** (0.729) | 2.489** (0.942) |
| Years in power | -0.050 (0.099) | -0.006 (0.104) |
| Constitution | 0.087 (0.100) | 0.030 (0.112) |
| Ruling party | 0.010 (0.056) | 0.043 (0.060) |
| GDP per capita | | 0.980* (0.385) |
| Oil production | | -0.246 (0.339) |
| Population | | 0.308 (0.217) |
| Ethnic frac | | 0.125 (0.935) |
| Constant | -3.053*** (0.902) | -7.275*** (2.101) |
| Observations | 106 | 101 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.216 | 0.339 |

Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses.

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Appendix Table 5: Cold War period

| DV: peaceful transition | (1) | (2) |
|-------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Succession rules | 0.119 (0.076) | 0.158* (0.071) |
| Second in command | 0.220* (0.104) | 0.286* (0.129) |
| Years in power | -0.010 (0.124) | 0.104 (0.149) |
| Constitution | -0.067 (0.146) | -0.173 (0.158) |
| Ruling party | | 0.025 (0.077) |
| GDP per capita | | 0.761* (0.325) |
| Oil production | | -0.010 (0.285) |
| Population | | 0.946 (0.503) |
| Ethnic frac | | 0.316 (1.772) |
| Constant | -0.634 (0.629) | -11.155* (4.571) |
| Observations | 47 | 44 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.144 | 0.301 |

Note: This sample includes only transitions that occurred before 1991.

Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Appendix Figure 1: Marginal Effects

