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Autocracies at Critical Junctures: A Model for the Study of Dictatorial Regimes

by WOLFGANG MERKEL and JOHANNES GERSCHEWSKI*

How can authoritarianism in an age of democratisation survive? What are the critical junctures when a dictatorship becomes less stable and potentially fails? Three pillars of stability of autocratic rule are identified: legitimacy, co-optation, and repression. Referring to historical institutionalism's key concept of critical juncture, the hypothesis is based on the observation that these junctures become regime threatening when a serious crisis in one pillar occurs and the two other pillars can no longer sufficiently compensate this instability.

We know much about democracies and the democratisation of political systems. Even though there is no such thing as the theory of democracy, we can certainly speak of particular democratic theories: theories of representative, direct, deliberative, defect, partial, presidential or parliamentary democracies. These individual theories cannot always claim to be fully sound; however, we do know significantly more about democracies than about autocratic regimes, both theoretically and empirically. Our present understanding of autocracies, we owe to Hanna Arendt, Carl J. Friedrich, Ernst Nolte, Giovanni Sartori or Juan Linz, to name only a few. In the 20th century, they explicitly conducted research on dictatorships.

What is even more noteworthy, as we are dealing with dictatorships as a form of rule, is that such regimes managed to prevail as a vicious reality of the 21st century. Increasing amounts of historical and political research in recent years foretold not only of the decline of the great, third wave of democratisation (or at least a “democratic rollback” as Larry Diamond

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anticipated), but even the “return of authoritarian powers” as predicted by Azar Gat. For the past four years Freedom House has recorded the slight, but continuous decline of democratic standards worldwide. By the end of 2010, it evaluated 42 governments worldwide as “not free,” but rather as open dictatorships. In addition, research on the external promotion of democracy has produced rather sobering results. Econometric and statistical analyses could not show any significant impact of the external promotion of democracy on the chances for democratisation in respective countries. China, Vietnam, Singapore, Russia, Iran, and Venezuela demonstrate that the struggle against autocratic systems has never really been won. Not only have dictatorial regimes survived the struggle, but they also have managed to become a magnet of economic prosperity and a role model of political order in a regional context. Whether the most recent events in the Arab world can trigger substantial change is yet to be seen; therefore, some scepticism is warranted.

A systematic, analytic approach to the study of dictatorial regimes is characteristic of the recent research, which is distinct from the rather descriptive research on totalitarianism and authoritarianism conducted between the 1950s and 1970s. Instead, recent research efforts use methods of political science to conduct comparative analyses with a number of cases, seeking general theoretical claims.

The present study of political regimes is about “big questions”, as stated by Barbara Geddes in 1999. It is for precisely this reason that there is an epistemological rift in the field separating the micro and the macro perspectives. At present, the action-theoretical observations from the micro perspective dominate the field of research once again. By modelling game-theory interaction processes within ruling elites,

Geddes showed that “One-Party-Regimes” with an average lifespan of 23 years are more stable than “Personalistic Regimes” (15.1 years) and “Military Regimes” (8.8 years). Military regimes are often faced with the dilemma to either secure integration of the armed forces or to ensure political rule by means of a military dictatorship, sometimes outside the normal chain of command.

Other regimes, especially One-Party-Regimes, are better protected from such conflicts because they can rely on institutionalised mechanisms of conflict. However, the question of succession has proven to be the Achilles heel of Personalistic Regimes. The latter lacks legitimate means and reduces the contingency of poorly formalised, dynastic or quasi-dynastic inheritance claims. In contrast to the mostly ideological One-Party-Regimes, Personalistic and Military Regimes can only rely on ideological loyalty.

As important as the insights (provided by game theory inspired explanations) are, the question remains: how can micro-based explanations alone account for the macro phenomenon of regime stability? What is necessary for connecting micro-to-macro theoretical elements? Such a middle-range approach is analytically more fruitful to answer big questions rather than macro-inspired correlation analysis or game theory models. A theoretical framework for such synthesis is provided by historical institutionalism, which has been gradually developed since the mid-1990s. As the most recent modification of neo-liberal institutionalism, historical institutionalism permits the following analytical operations: it is able to connect structures with actors in a useful manner; it is a suitable framework for both quantitative and qualitative comparisons; and it is capable to explain continuity as well as change.

Institutions via opportunity structures filter political actions. They structure action incentives and influence the preferences, coalitions and strategies of actors. Once established, institutions develop self-reinforcing tendencies: Interests are formed and certainties of expectations and calculations are evolved.



Actors want “investments” in the strategic orientation of such institutions to amortise. Thus, institutional paths develop, which become considerably consolidated. Path dependencies evolve, which can prevail even during the rise of more efficient institutional alternatives.

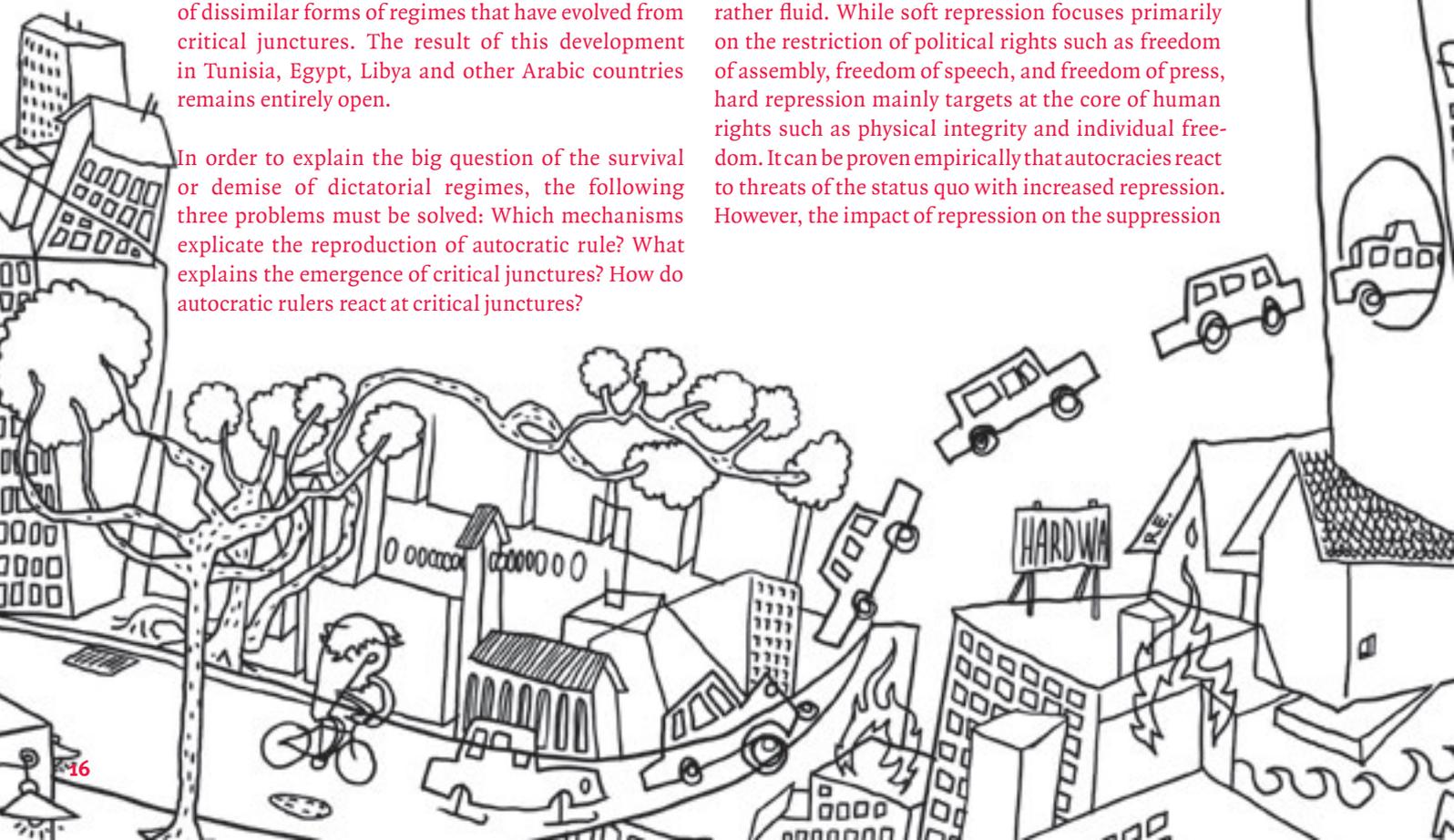
Paths can also end or be altered: especially as a consequence of critical junctures. In the research of regimes, critical junctures can be interpreted as drastic situations of accumulated crises. During such times, the ability of institutions to shape behaviour normatively condenses, and thus, actors receive a broader scope of action. The usually extensive consequences of decisions made can then trigger new path dependencies. At critical junctures, the regime itself is at stake. The outcomes are by no means predictable. They are highly dependent on the decisions and the behaviour of the relevant elites. Thus, outcomes are rather contingent: whether a critical juncture leads to a democracy or a hybrid regime, whether it just causes a change within the governing coalition or the political leadership and the old elites are able to re-establish an autocratic balance. Poland after 1990, the Soviet Union and Russia after 1993 or China after 1989 and Iran after 2009 demonstrate the spectrum of dissimilar forms of regimes that have evolved from critical junctures. The result of this development in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other Arabic countries remains entirely open.

In order to explain the big question of the survival or demise of dictatorial regimes, the following three problems must be solved: Which mechanisms explicate the reproduction of autocratic rule? What explains the emergence of critical junctures? How do autocratic rulers react at critical junctures?

But single questions do not constitute an academic research approach, even if they are analytically appropriate. Rather, it is necessary to recognize their interdependence and to develop a research framework with the synthesis imperative of structure and action at its core. This is presented here as a “Three-Pillar-Model”.

Dictatorial regimes base their rule principally on three pillars: legitimacy, repression and co-optation. Legitimacy has essentially two foundations: one that is normative-ideological and one related to performance. Anti-liberalism, anti-parliamentarianism, racism, nationalism, law and order, religious-anachronistic orders of salvation, and Marxist-Leninist future designs are at least temporarily capable of creating a normative approval amongst those who are subjected to the rule. However, fascist and communist ideologies have lost their normative persuasiveness. If anything, the political Islam and its variants are able to develop an ideological cohesiveness within autocratic regimes. However, since the restriction of fundamental human rights is a principle of their claim to power, the promises of their salvation runs the risk of drying out within the repressive reality. Also because dictatorial regimes are in principle less stable, they are also more dependent on their performance in the field of economy as well as security and order.

It is undisputed that autocracies are primarily based on repression. There are many attempts to highlight repression as the defining feature of autocratic rule. This becomes particularly evident in Hanna Arendt’s study on “Elements and Origins of Total Rule”. Repression occurs in different forms and levels of intensity. One can distinguish between “soft” and “hard” repression, albeit transition between the two is rather fluid. While soft repression focuses primarily on the restriction of political rights such as freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of press, hard repression mainly targets at the core of human rights such as physical integrity and individual freedom. It can be proven empirically that autocracies react to threats of the status quo with increased repression. However, the impact of repression on the suppression



of protest remains uncertain and is highly dependent on the context. Research shows both a positive and a negative relation between repression of the state and protest against the state. Repression alone cannot stabilise a system permanently. The related losses of legitimacy are usually high: as the repression increases, the legitimacy decreases, and vice versa.

The third pillar of rule is co-optation. The selective use of co-optation enables the autocratic ruling elites to tie important actors and groups from outside the original regime core to the dictatorship so that they do not employ their resources against the regime. Those strategically important actors consist mainly of economic elites, the security apparatus and the military. Political offices and privileges as well as economic resources are the common exchanges of “political rent”. Corruption, clientelism and the establishment of patrimonial networks are equally widespread. On one hand, the autocratic regime elite has to gain the support of relevant actors for the regime while also ensuring that none of the actors accumulates too much power. The availability of resources constrains the extent of such purchased collaboration for the regime. In general, oil-exporting rentier states regulate most of the resources.

The three-pillar-model has a heuristic advantage. It makes it possible to systematically localise the triggers of crisis phenomena. One can assume that fractures in one pillar can be temporarily compensated for by the consolidation of the other pillars. At the same time, cracks in one pillar can overload the others and thus lead to a general collapse. However, the higher the institutionalisation within one pillar and the more appropriate the balance between the pillars, the more stable the respective authoritarian system.

The ideal equilibrium for the survival of autocracies is likely to be where legitimacy is as high as possible, hard repression as low as possible and co-optation at average. This conserves resources, minimises the unintended consequences and thus stabilises the system.

The three-pillar-model is not yet a theory. However, it provides a theoretical shelter for description without explanatory power. It also provides a heuristic framework, which can make the origins of stability and instability of very different systems of dictatorial rule not only comparable, but also explicable.

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