

Book Review

CONSTRAINING DICTATORSHIP: FROM PERSONALIZED RULE TO INSTITUTIONALIZED REGIMES, BY ANNE MENG, CAMBRIDGE, UK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020.

Clay G. Wescott

Anne Meng presents a convincing case that autocratic leaders that are strong relative to other elites when achieving power can rule based on their own personal instincts. By contrast, if rival elites are strong relative to the leader, and pose a credible threat of a successful rebellion, leaders need to put constraints on their own power by institutionalizing 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 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 and said to confirm the overall findings in Africa.

Formal institutional measures that matter most are constitutional succession procedures, which are usually adopted within the first year of a leader's term, and are typically not revoked. These are supported by informal power-sharing measures including the 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 that achieved power by leading military coups, and leaders with access to oil rents. Weaker leaders include those that succeed strong ones and cannot live up to their stellar reputations. This group includes some designated successors that are selected because they are thought to be weak, and not to have the influence to depose the present leader.

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

Other scholars have tried to explain the persistence of authoritarian regimes by weak political parties, weak and coopted democracy, and other factors. A problem posed by these

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approaches is that data often depends on expert judgments (e.g., How weak are the parties? How 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?).

An important conclusion from Meng's work is that democratic transitions are easily exploited and corrupted by autocratic leaders, and face high hurdles in being effective in constraining these leaders, while other measures such as succession rules and informal power-sharing have been successfully put in place to constrain authoritarian leaders in many tough-to-govern places. An important next step would be to investigate other possible benefits and tradeoffs of these institutionalized constraints on autocratic leaders. Does the increased political stability and reduced violence in these places 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 even a constrained autocracy is unable to deliver the goods?

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