

Information Politics in Dictatorships

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Abstract

Political science has made great progress in the study of nondemocratic regime survival in the past fifteen years. Democratization is only one threat that such regimes face—indeed, most nondemocratic regimes are replaced by other dictators. How do regimes learn about the threats facing them? Cutting edge research has pointed to elite institutions, such as legislatures and Politburos, easing information problems amongst regime insiders. However, the ways that nondemocratic regimes gather information about local agent performance and society remain underexplored.

Bio Paragraph

Jeremy Wallace is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at The Ohio State University. He received his Ph.D. from Stanford University in 2009. His research examines the politics of nondemocratic societies, particularly contemporary China. Using cross-national and Chinese data, his first book—*Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China*—details the threats that cities pose for authoritarian regimes, regime responses to those threats such as China’s management of urbanization, and how those responses can backfire by exacerbating the growth of slums and cities. His research has been published in the *Journal of Politics*, *British Journal of Political Science*, and *Global Environmental Change*, among others.

Introduction

The ousting of long-time dictators in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 undermined conventional understandings of the longevity and durability of nondemocratic regimes. Tunisia's Ben Ali was pressed out of office following protests in the streets of Tunis, the capital. A lack of jobs and increasing food prices were the some of the timber upon which an isolated incident exploded into a conflagration that brought down the regime. The spark was the self-immolation of a young unemployed university graduate in Sidi Bouzid, a small city in the interior of the country, after local officials and police punished him for selling vegetables on the street without a permit.¹ This sacrificial act ignited demonstrations in that city that were violently put down by regime's security officers. Ben Ali replaced the regional governor and promised massive spending to employ university graduates.² Despite these concessions, the protests became more deadly, and by 12 January they spread to Tunis. Ben Ali fled the country for Saudi Arabia on 14 January.³ The Jasmine Revolution had begun.⁴

The downfall of Egypt's Mubarak regime followed quickly thereafter. Massive demonstrations on 25 January 2011 took over numerous politically significant locales, most prominently Tahrir square in central Cairo. Inspired by the Tunisians' success, citizens frustrated—with high levels of unemployment, unfair elections, crumbling infrastructure, corruption, state violence, an aging dictator angling to replace himself with his son Gamal, and more—marched *en masse* and took over the central square.⁵ The army refused to open fire on the crowds, which remained in Tahrir until Mubarak stepped down on 11 February.⁶

On the other hand, the situation in Beijing and other Chinese cities could not have been more different. No massive protests expressed outrage at the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing or in any other of China's major metropolises. While activists did attempt to use the Arab uprisings to call

¹ ("Q&A," 2011)

² (Voice of America, 2011)

³ (Al Jazeera, 2011)

⁴ The name "Jasmine Revolution" comes in the tradition of naming revolutions for colors and flowers (Carnation Revolution (Portugal 1974), Rose Revolution (Georgia 2003), Orange Revolution (Ukraine 2004), Tulip Revolution (Kyrgryzstan 2005), Green Revolution (Iran 2009), etc.) with the Jasmine flower having some political resonance in Tunisia (Frangeul, 2011).

⁵ (Lynch, 2012; Masoud, 2011).

⁶ (Lynch, 2012, p. 92).

attention to problems of governance and freedom, the Chinese regime quickly detained them, put into place internet controls that reduced the ability of “netizens” to organize and communicate, and curtailed the activities of reporters.⁷ What differentiated China from Tunisia or Egypt? Why has the CCP regime endured while other seemingly durable regimes collapsed?

More broadly, how do dictators learn about the threats that they face? In analyzing the politics of dictatorships, political science has traditionally focused on the topic of democratization—that is the end of dictatorship. But most dictators and nondemocratic regimes are replaced not in transitions to democracy but by other nondemocratic regimes.⁸ Thus the existential threats to a dictator are not just those of mass uprisings leading to democratization but also elite takeovers, splits, and coups. Scholars have pointed to a number of different factors as significantly affecting the probability of regime collapse: the identity of the leader, the presence of a legislature, the extent of personalization of politics, the rate of economic growth, and the political geography of the country.⁹ However, research into the mechanisms that dictators themselves use to learn about the threats that they face—and how these mechanisms shape the societies that they rule over—is only emerging.

Foundational Research

Nondemocratic regime survival is not equivalent to the survival of nondemocracy as the ruling technology in a territory. A king killed in a palace putsch by an ambitious colonel does not contemplate the regime type of the government after his assassination. For the dead king, the continuation of nondemocratic rule in the country provides no measure of success or comfort.¹⁰ Take the CCP’s Red army triumph over the Nationalists in 1949, forcing the latter to flee to Taiwan. This ‘liberation’ did not reflect a change in China’s *regime type*, but it certainly was a change in *regime*, as Chiang Kai-shek and his exiled compatriots would have told you. Regimes care greatly about the possibility of regime change and make efforts to head off threats to their continued rule. Yet, until recently, the dominant focus in political science has not been regimes and

⁷ (Dickson, 2011)

⁸ (Geddes, 1999b; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007)

⁹ Among others, see (Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010; Gandhi, 2008; Geddes, 1999b; Magaloni, 2006; Pepinsky, 2009a; Wallace, 2013; Wright, 2008).

¹⁰ Post-tenure fate is something that leaders do consider when making decisions, however (Debs & Goemans, 2010).

their survival but changes in regime type.¹¹ Continuous measures of regime type, such as the ones created by Polity and Freedom House, are ubiquitous and numerically dominate the quantitative study of social science, but changes in these ‘democracy’ scores often fail to reflect regime changes.¹²

The study of nondemocratic regime survival has become a growth industry in the social sciences. Competing typologies of nondemocratic regimes are said to account for variation in the duration of these regimes.¹³ Nondemocratic regime types are associated not only with different durations but also different foreign policy behavior, patterns of economic growth, likelihood of democratization, and the fates of leaders after they leave office.¹⁴ Military regimes are particularly short-lived, while single or dominant party regimes endure.¹⁵ Others have pointed to higher levels of institutionalization, such as the presence of elections or legislatures, as abetting authoritarian rule.¹⁶ Still others examine structural threats facing dictators and their responses to these threats.¹⁷ This burgeoning literature has shed light on what was obscured by the focus on democratization.

Regimes are constantly attempting to strengthen their grip on power. They focus on building or maintaining repressive capacity, implementing legitimation strategies, and holding together political institutions and coalitions.¹⁸ The most studied nondemocratic regime presently is China’s long-lived CCP-led regime.

Much contemporary analysis of China’s political system revolves around the ideas that authority is fragmented and the center’s insight into localities is limited. While the top leadership are in Beijing, local officials or society are not under the total control of the center. Indeed, local discretion is something of a defining characteristic of the Chinese regime after Mao Zedong’s death and is often seen as a “double-edged sword”: given credit for inculcating policy

¹¹ Oddly, one of the few times in comparative politics where the interaction of the masses has led the social science literature over the interactions of the elites.

¹² (Dahl, 1971). (Cheibub et al., 2010) on different measures of democracy. For a more expansive treatment, see (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002).

¹³ e.g. (Geddes, 1999a; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007)

¹⁴ (Debs & Goemans, 2010; Gandhi, 2008; Weeks, 2008; Wright, 2008) See also Debs n.d.

¹⁵ (Geddes, 1999b; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Magaloni, 2006)

¹⁶ (Blaydes, 2010; Lust-Okar, 2005, 2006)

¹⁷ (Wallace, 2013)

¹⁸ See (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Policzer, 2009) on repressive capacity; (Blaydes, 2010; Gandhi, 2008) on political institutions; and (Magaloni, 2006; Pepinsky, 2009b) on political coalitions.

innovations and economic development, while at the same time leading to poor governance and corruption.¹⁹

Local competition between officials is viewed as one channel accounting for China's impressive economic growth during the reform era.²⁰ Promotions are valued by local officials who are, in part, judged on macroeconomic performance data.²¹ Such competition constrains local governments from predatory behavior; businesses benefit from this competition to attract investment and improve the climate for economic activity. Many argue that the ruthless competition for promotion translates into good economic policymaking and efficient, or at least business friendly, governance.

On the other hand, local government discretion has some demonstrable negative consequences. Local governments have relatively free hands in dealing with economies under their rule, yielding pervasive corruption. Competition between localities has also led to internal trade barriers as officials act to protect local businesses from competition from "external" actors. Trucks carrying goods across county borders can be charged extortionate tariffs or prevented from entering the rival county to sell their goods, no matter the price.²² Such protectionism is considered inefficient at the level of nation-states; when the actors in question are Chinese counties, with populations on average in the single digit millions, the amount of waste is a substantial share of total economic production in the county. Negative consequences of local discretion can move to the point of defiance, where specific targets put forward by the center are ignored by local officials.²³

Local discretion is fundamentally an information problem. The center is unable to observe its agents at the local level and to be aware of the multitude and variety of issues with which they deal on a daily basis. New social scientific research on dictatorships is turning to such information problems as critical to improve our understandings of regimes and the threats that they face.

Cutting Edge Research

¹⁹ (Mei & Pearson, 2014)

²⁰ (Oi, 1999; Weingast, Qian, & Montinola, 1995)

²¹ This literature is sometimes described as the "tournament model" of promotion and has been used to justify descriptions of the CCP-led regime as a meritocracy (e.g., (Li, 2012; Su, Tao, Xi, & Li, 2012)).

²² (Wedeman, 2003)

²³ (Mei & Pearson, 2014)

The political place of information in nondemocratic contexts is critical. In democracies, threats and opportunities for politicians arise from elections, which represent the aggregation of individual preferences amongst the politician in a controlled setting. Politicians in nondemocracies, on the other hand, face a more open-ended and irregular opportunity-threat space.²⁴ Svulik (2012) condenses the threats that dictators face into two types—those from the masses (“the problem of authoritarian control”) and those from other elites inside the ruling coalition (“the problem of authoritarian power sharing”).²⁵

The principal method dictators use to address problems with elites is the creation of institutions, like Politburos and legislatures, to regularize communication and make public information among the elite.²⁶ Scholars have linked these legislatures to both political survival and economic growth, with the mechanism causing these outcomes to be that they act as arenas of information collection and exchange as well as tying the dictator’s hands.²⁷ While the mechanisms proposed are plausible, research is just beginning to delve into the actual operation of authoritarian legislatures and other elite institutions.²⁸

However, information problems exist not only among the elite, but also over threats that may emanate from society as well as the monitoring of local agents. Threatening acts, such as small-scale protests, can be harnessed as fire alarms alerting the center to local malfeasance, as occurs in China.²⁹ More direct mechanisms are also used in dictatorships, as shown in work by Dimitrov.³⁰ Reconsidering the conventional wisdom that the Eastern European Communist regimes were surprised by the mass resistance of 1989, Dimitrov shows that those regimes had detailed information on their populations related to both overt and covert discontent. Regimes conducted regular surveys and maintained institutions for complaints alongside more traditional surveillance activities through state security forces, internal media reports, and the Communist Party

²⁴ While many nondemocracies have elections, they are not as pivotal as in democratic settings.

²⁵ (Svulik, 2012)

²⁶ (Svulik, 2012)

²⁷ (C. Boix, 2003; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Wright, 2008). Also (Blaydes, 2010; Carles Boix & Svulik, 2013; Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2006; Svulik, 2012)

²⁸ Exceptions include (Malesky, Schuler, Malesky, & Schuler, 2011; Malesky & Schuler, 2010; Truex, 2014).

²⁹ (Lorentzen, 2013; O’Brien & Li, 2006)

³⁰ E.g. (Dimitrov, 2014)

itself.³¹ While regimes had an interest in avoiding the public dissemination of information about the levels of discontent, they had every reason to collect information on it for their own internal use.³²

Future Directions

Regimes interested in their own survival are not solely concerned about contemporaneous levels of discontent, but the socio-economic and governance situations facing their citizens shape the development of future threats to the regime and are thus targets for information collection. However, two difficulties arise that are important subjects for future work on the information politics of dictatorships. First, how do the elites' data collecting enterprises shape the incentives and actions of local agents as well as society's under their rule? Second, is the information collected and released by nondemocratic regimes likely to be subject to manipulation for political reasons?

Investigation into these questions is most developed in the case of China's regime. The work on the double-edged nature of local discretion in China is based on the idea that local governments are judged by a series of quantitative metrics. The center, then, attempts to create a system of information collection that focuses on what needs to be observed and how. The regime's emphasis has been to collect quantitative metrics of economic performance, population growth, social stability, and, increasingly, the environment. These metrics shape the behavior of local actors in ways both beneficial—promoting economic growth—and detrimental—wasted resources and corruption—to the central regime's interests.

The second future direction for work on information politics in dictatorships is on the possibility and reality of data manipulation. Work by Xiao and Womack as well as Wallace has begun to explore this topic.³³ As Xiao and Womack write:

Behind the problems of credibility of public official information in China lie two patterns of internal information distortion, one restricting the downward flow of sensitive

³¹ (Dimitrov, 2014, pp. 10–13)

³² (Dimitrov, 2014). Security, intelligence, and police forces in nondemocratic regimes are increasingly being investigated, e.g., (Policzer, 2009; Schoenhals, 2013). On the dangers of public dissemination of information in nondemocracies, see (Hollyer, Rosendorff, & Vreeland, 2011) and below.

³³ (Wallace, n.d.; Xiao & Womack, 2014)

general information and the other filtering the upward flow of local information. Information gathered at the center is increasingly restricted as it is transmitted down the bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the ‘facts on the ground’ are sifted by local official interests at each level of upward transmittal.³⁴

Xiao and Womack establish with survey data of local officials in China that there exists real concern that the official statistics reflect the reality “on the ground.”

The problem can go beyond filtering. Local officials operating, like they do in China, on a system that rewards local officials based on quantified performance metrics might have incentives to manipulate those performance statistics. As Wallace writes:

Since citizens value economic development, hierarchical regimes interested in monitoring lower level officials without undue auditing expenses can use economic statistics as information shortcuts. Lower-level officials, knowing the statistics by which they are judged and having some control over the bureaucrats who create those statistics, have an incentive to juke [i.e. manipulate] the stats. A center that judges sub-national officials using performance-based targets is often reliant on these same sub-national officials to supply them with those performance estimates. This principal-agent problem bedevils a dictator interested in creating an accountability mechanism for subordinates based on economic data. Sub-national leaders may be rewarded on the basis of manipulated data since monitoring costs make it expensive to night impossible for central authorities to know the real situation on the ground with certainty.

Such data manipulation at the local level can undermine the reputation of the regime as a whole. On the other hand, such manipulations hold the potential to be useful at the national level as well.

Economic downturns are dangerous for dictators. In part, this danger arises because the number of individuals holding grievances against the regime

³⁴ (Xiao & Womack, 2014)

increases. Additionally, when such poor performance is officially acknowledged, the public as a whole is aware of the bad times and as such may be more able to coordinate collective action against the regime.³⁵ However, if a regime can successfully manipulate the public release of economic statistics, it can muddy these waters. Some may stop seeing themselves as amongst a large cohort negatively disposed to the regime. Individuals may well think that they are, if not precisely alone in their bad circumstances, then perhaps part of a smaller slice of the population that has drawn the short end of the stick in times of general plenty. Individuals that do not believe that the citizenry is aggrieved enough to participate in or at least tacitly support revolutionary action are less likely to move forward with such seditious acts. Such changes in general beliefs may be enough for a regime to avoid danger in a precarious moment, one with revolutionary or coup potential.³⁶

Dictators will never be able to know all of the threats that they face with perfect certainty. The possibility that the sacrifice of a single individual in response to the misbehavior of local agents might destroy the long-lived regime of Ben Ali in Tunisia seemed beyond remote prior to its occurrence in 2011. However, the ways in which dictators attempt to investigate the threats that they do face, both from democratization and from other potential nondemocratic regimes, remains fertile ground for social science research. In the end, it is clear that the fall of the Eastern European Communist regimes in 1989 did not mark the end of history; capitalist democracy remains ascendant, but it is far from universal. As such, it is incumbent on researchers to explore the politics of nondemocratic regimes. These politics are the politics of dangers, collecting information about those dangers, and the ways in which that information gathering can shape the contours of governance.

³⁵ (Hollyer et al., 2011)

³⁶ On revolutionary moments, see, for instance, (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005).

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