A man walks by a portrait of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad near the Syrian capital of Damascus. The Syrian civil war shows the potential conflagration that can occur when an authoritarian regime starts to lose control. Assad met a peaceful uprising as part of the Arab Spring in 2011 with violence and clung to power. The Syrian civil war ensued, sucking in international actors, including the United States and Russia, and provoking the largest humanitarian and refugee crisis since World War II, which rocked the foundations of the European Union. Assad regained control of Syrian territory, but an official settlement remained elusive in 2019.

(Youssef Karwashan/AFP/Getty Images)
Key Questions

- Some authoritarian regimes disperse power more widely than others. How can comparativists determine “who rules” and what limits executive power in an authoritarian regime?

- Authoritarian regimes come in several different subtypes: military, one-party, theocratic, personalist, and electoral authoritarian. In what ways do differences across these subtypes explain differences in leaders’ actions, levels of repression, and types of popular participation?

- Why is clientelism so prevalent and important in authoritarian regimes? In what types of authoritarian regimes does it seem most important, and what might explain this?

- Some authoritarian regimes allow at least some institutionalized limits on rulers’ power. What explains where and why this happens, or doesn’t happen?

The spread of democracy in the aftermath of the Cold War led some to believe that democratic rule was irreversible; dictators were relics, soon to be relegated to the “dustbin of history.” Many eastern European and African societies that threw off or severely challenged their authoritarian regimes, however, ended up creating new, albeit less repressive ones. Electoral authoritarian regimes, in which some opposition and participation is allowed but a key ruler or party firmly holds on to power, became more common. In other cases, especially in the Middle East, the winds of democratic change did not blow strongly enough to seriously challenge authoritarian regimes until the sudden outburst of popular opposition in the Arab Spring of 2011. The Country and Concept table on page 352 shows how common and how varied authoritarian regimes are, just within our eleven case studies.

The answer to the question “Who rules?” seems like it ought to be particularly obvious in authoritarian regimes: the dictator does. Discerning who really has power and how much power they have, however, is not that easy. Authoritarian regimes tend to arise in relatively weak states that have weak formal institutions, and therefore

Learning Objectives

After reading chapter 8, you should be able to do the following:

8.1 Discuss current trends in authoritarian rule
8.2 Explain the “dictator’s dilemma” and what it means for authoritarian regimes
8.3 Articulate the role of elections, parties, and legislatures in authoritarian regimes
8.4 Explicate the function of clientelism and civil society in authoritarian regimes
## Authoritarian Rule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>TWENTIETH-CENTURY AUTORITARIAN RULE SINCE INDEPENDENCE (YEARS)</th>
<th>AUTORITARIAN REGIME TYPE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF SUPREME LEADERS</th>
<th>AVERAGE LENGTH OF LEADER’S RULE (YEARS)</th>
<th>CAUSE OF REGIME DEMISE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1964–1985</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China*</td>
<td>1927–1949</td>
<td>Modernizing authoritarian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1949–</td>
<td>Communist/modernizing authoritarian</td>
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<td>11.5</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Modernizing authoritarian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>War loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>War loss</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Theocratic</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
<td>1867–1945</td>
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<td>26</td>
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</tr>
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<td>4.5</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
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<td>1966–1979</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Russia</td>
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<td>Communist</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>Democratization</td>
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<tr>
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<td>None</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*China’s republic (1912–1927) was never consolidated an effective state.

Informal institutions and processes are more important. A key difference among authoritarian regimes is how institutionalized they are. We defined institutionalization in chapter 5 as the degree to which government processes and procedures are established, predictable, and routinized. In the least-institutionalized personalist regimes, decisions truly can be made and implemented at the whim of the dictator. In other authoritarian regimes, the leader’s power is still extensive, but it is somewhat curtailed by institutionalized checks, typically controlled by other elites.

Wide variation in institutionalization in authoritarian regimes also makes explaining political behavior challenging. In chapter 3, we outlined several subtypes of authoritarian regimes based on their origins and formal institutions.
one-party, military, personalist, theocratic, and electoral authoritarian. These subtypes have different governing institutions, but given that formal institutions in authoritarian regimes tend to be weak, how much does this really explain? Are one-party regimes as a group different in distinctive ways from military regimes? Does one subtype always provide greater levels of institutionalized limits on executive power? Is one subtype always more repressive?

**Trends in Authoritarian Rule**

While not the promised land of democracy that some analysts predicted, the end of the Cold War certainly had a significant effect on authoritarian regimes. Their numbers declined from about 75 percent of all countries in the late 1970s to about
FIGURE 8.1

Restrictions on Political Parties in Dictatorships, 1946–2008


Note: Overall distribution of individual categories in parentheses.

FIGURE 8.2

Legislative Selection in Dictatorships, 1946–2008


Note: Overall distribution of individual categories in parentheses.
40 percent by 2008 (Svolik 2012, 25), and their institutions changed. In the last decade, however, the number of authoritarian regimes has increased slightly, as the degree of political freedom around the world has declined (see chapter 9). Map 8.1 shows the global decline of authoritarian regimes as a whole, as well as their concentration now in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

With the expansion of democracy as a global ideal, the number of purely authoritarian regimes fell, and more regimes attempted to legitimize their rule through the creation of electoral authoritarian regimes (see Figures 8.1 and 8.2). Most dramatic was the precipitous drop in one-party authoritarian regimes at the end of the Cold War and their replacement with multiple-party systems. Figure 8.2 demonstrates that over 80 percent of current regimes have elected legislatures of some sort, and about 60 percent allow multiple candidates per legislative seat, a good indicator of an electoral authoritarian regime. In about 40 percent, the ruling party controls less than three-quarters of the legislative seats, indicating it has allowed the opposition a significant (though still firmly minority) position. Today, most authoritarian regimes allow some sort of legislature and opposition parties to exist and participate in some form. A key question is why.

The Dictator’s Dilemma: Governing Authoritarian Regimes

While authoritarian regimes around the world have a wide variety of formal institutions, they all rule through some combination of repression, co-optation, and efforts at legitimation. Repression is the popular image that pops into people’s minds when they think of dictators, but it is an expensive way to rule. Even the most ruthless dictator needs to find other means by which to ensure citizens’ loyalties. Co-optation via material inducements and official positions, which often goes hand in hand with corruption, is the most obvious alternative means of securing support. Most regimes also expend resources to try to instill loyalty in the citizenry to secure some actual legitimacy; if citizens believe in the regime, they will obey it without the costs of repression or co-optation. Communist parties use their well-developed ideology for this purpose to a greater extent than do most authoritarian regimes, but virtually all authoritarian regimes try to gain legitimacy in some way.

Repression, the universal tool (to varying degrees) of authoritarian regimes, produces what rational choice theorists term the dictator’s dilemma: because of the repression they practice, dictators lack accurate information on how much political support they actually have. Repression breeds fear, which in turn breeds misinformation; the greater the repression, the greater the dictator’s dilemma (Wintrobe 1998).

Uncertain of their position, dictators often try to co-opt potential rivals by purchasing their loyalty. They can never be certain, however, of how much they need to spend to purchase the loyalty they require, so they tend to overspend, lavishing resources on key sectors from which they believe threats may emanate. Various elements in the military often receive such attention. In ethnically divided societies, dictators may focus spending on their own ethnic group to maintain their core base of support. In a number of African authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, you could tell who was in power by how well paved the roads were in different regions of the country. The current dictator would build infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals mainly in his home area. As you drove from one region to another, you could literally see who ruled by the immediate and extreme change in the quality of the roads.

Stronger institutions have the potential to reduce the dictator’s dilemma by providing regime leaders with better information on who supports them and who...
doesn't, as well as possibly increasing their legitimacy by providing services to the citizenry. Stronger institutions, though, can also be a threat to a dictator's power because they can enhance the power of potential rival elites who lead them, so dictators typically do not create them of their own free will (Migdal 1988). Rather, the relationships and relative power among key regime elites heavily influence how strongly institutionalized or how personalist a regime becomes and therefore how successful it is at overcoming the dictator's dilemma.

Virtually all authoritarian regimes recognize one supreme leader, even if he leads a larger ruling group, such as the politburo in a communist system or the ruling junta in a military government. This supreme leader typically wields executive power with few formal limits, though the extent of those limits varies and is crucial for understanding how different regimes function. No dictator gains power alone; all need the support of other key elites to gain power in the first place. Once they come to power, though, the group chooses a supreme leader, who will likely try to maximize his own power and will fear his allies might try to remove him, as they did the previous regime. The elites who helped put him in power, of course, fear the supreme leader will take all power so they will try to limit him.

Milan Svolik (2012) demonstrated that when there is a balance of power between the supreme leader and other key elites, the regime is more likely to create formalized institutions that limit the supreme leader's power. This balance of power, in turn, is most likely when the elites around the supreme leader are united, because their unity creates a credible threat that they could overthrow the supreme leader, forcing him to accept limits on his power. If key elites around the leader are factionalized, the leader will be able to overcome the limits they try to place on him more easily and the regime will become more personalist. If not checked, a fully personalist regime with very weak institutions can result from this process (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018).

Barbara Geddes and colleagues (2018) created a data set on authoritarian rule to demonstrate that authoritarian regimes that emerge from disciplined militaries or long-standing political parties become more institutionalized because their elites are more unified due to the strength of the institutions from which they came. In our case study of Brazil, for instance, the modernizing authoritarian regime that the military established in 1964 (see chapter 3) was highly institutionalized with strict limits on and rotation of the supreme leader, at least in part because the military itself was highly disciplined and had a clear purpose when it came to power. Similarly, regimes that come to power via an established communist party often create more institutionalized regimes, though this varies, as the history of China since the communist revolution of 1949 demonstrates in our case study below.

Security is all regimes' top priority, and this is especially true for authoritarian regimes, whatever their level of institutionalization, because they often have limited legitimacy. The loyalty of the military is, of course, crucial. Where elites have successfully limited the supreme leader, the regime will typically rely on the regular military, which they often control directly in a military government or control via a political party infiltrating the military, as in many communist regimes. In less-institutionalized regimes, personalist leaders often place close supporters, even family members, in key positions in the country's security apparatus. In ethnically divided societies, they often deputize people of their own ethnic group or even from their own hometown, to ensure loyalty. For instance, Saddam Hussein in Iraq (r. 1979–2003) put not only his fellow Sunni Arabs but also people from his home village in positions of authority in his extensive security apparatus. Personalist leaders also frequently create entirely new security organizations, loyal only to them, as Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya (r. 1977–2011) did. The creation of military organizations distinct from the national army and personally loyal to the supreme leader rather than to a broader institution of
authoritarian rule such as a military junta or communist politburo is a tell-tale sign of the personalization of a regime.

Many authoritarian regimes also create vast networks of spies, both civilian and military, whose job is to gather intelligence on opponents, providing information that can help overcome the dictator’s dilemma. For the supreme leader, the targets of this surveillance are likely to be the key elites surrounding him who might threaten his rule. For the regime as a whole, the targets are typically a broader set of lower-level and/or regional elites who could potentially threaten the regime. In the age of electronic surveillance technology and artificial intelligence (AI), surveillance threatens to become even more extreme, as AI can allow a regime to follow masses of people very quickly and correlate vast amounts of data to identify patterns that might threaten the regime. Our case study of China is the leading example of this trend.

Virtually all authoritarian regimes can be threatened by the issue of succession of the supreme leader. Unlike electoral democracies, most authoritarian regimes have no standard procedure for changing leadership on a regular basis. Each regime must create its own system for choosing new leaders. Again, the degree of institutionalization matters greatly. Communist regimes, for instance, generally choose new leaders from among key contenders within the politburo. While the exact process is usually hidden from the general public, both regime leaders and citizens know that should a leader die, resign, or be forced from office, a pool of successors are available and top party leaders collectively choose one from among their own. The Country and Concept table on page 352 illustrates the institutionalization of succession in the Soviet regime (listed under Russia in the table); it had seven different leaders over seventy-four years, while many less-institutionalized authoritarian regimes typically have no succession system and fail to survive their founders’ demise.

Personalist leaders often rule for life or until they are forced out of office. Many groom a successor as they age, simultaneously working to ensure that the successor does not become a threat before it’s time to pass the baton. In the most personalist regimes, the leader grooms his own son to be his successor. The Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua (1936–1979) began with Anastasio senior, who was succeeded by his son Luis, who in turn was succeeded by his brother, another Anastasio. This was also the case in the regimes of “Papa Doc” (1957–1971) and “Baby Doc” Duvalier (1971–1986) in Haiti. Baby Doc was only nineteen years old when his father died and he became head of state. The death of a personalist leader often creates a crisis for the regime. The rise of electoral authoritarian regimes since the end of the Cold War reduced the likelihood of this type of succession crisis. During the Cold War, military coups were the most common way leadership changed in authoritarian regimes, but since then, non-violent, internal means of leadership change, including elections, have become most common (Frantz 2018, 55–57).

While the heart of authoritarian regimes is the top leadership in and around the executive and supreme leader, other branches of government matter as well. Authoritarian regimes generally curtail the rule of law and judicial independence, although some allow these institutions slightly more leeway, typically only in non-political cases. Providing the political good of basic personal security to citizens who do not oppose the regime allows the regime to gain a degree of legitimacy. This type of limited judicial autonomy can also help top leaders gain information about how effectively their state functions on the ground, reducing the dictator’s dilemma. Citizens can go to court to attempt to get local government to carry out its functions properly, revealing to leaders potential local problems.

Allowing courts to enforce property rights and contracts encourages domestic and foreign investment, which improves economic growth and therefore
government revenue, potentially strengthening the regime. Even so, research on our case study, China, found that authorities allowed judicial autonomy on economic issues only when organized investors could demand it and credibly threaten to take their assets elsewhere (Wong 2013). Ultimately, however, authoritarian leaders do not submit to the limitations of the rule of law: when necessary, they use the judicial system to repress their opponents and remove judges to ensure that the leader’s will is done. In many authoritarian regimes, especially personalist ones, the judiciary becomes quite corrupt as well. Regime leaders and other wealthy people often bribe judges to rule in their favor; once this begins, more and more people recognize what “justice” actually requires, and corruption expands.

All states require a bureaucracy, and all leaders face the principal–agent problem we identified in chapter 5. In an authoritarian regime, though, the question is how strong and independent a bureaucracy the supreme leader wants and opponents can demand. A less-institutionalized bureaucracy, while not serving citizens’ interests well, may have distinct advantages to the leader in the form of patronage opportunities it offers regime supporters. Bureaucratic positions provide opportunities for corruption. The top leaders can maintain loyalty by allowing officials to use their positions to their own benefit, weakening the institutions of the state but rewarding the loyalty of potential rivals. If this behavior is informally institutionalized, it can become somewhat predictable. Lesser officials will remain loyal because they believe they can rise to higher and more rewarding positions, which can lead to somewhat predictable career paths within key institutions. In more personalist regimes, like that of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire (see “The ‘Politics of Survival’ in Mobutu’s Zaire,” p. 359), bureaucratic appointments and corruption can be a means for the supreme leader to maintain personal power over potential rivals.

The level of institutionalization of authoritarian regimes, then, is crucial to how and how long they rule. More institutionalized regimes can regularize career paths for supporters and succession, increasing their longevity and support. More personalist regimes make all aspects of political life less certain, reducing support and increasing the chance the regime could be overthrown from within or collapse from a succession crisis. Ironically, a balance of power among the supreme leader and his key allies is more likely to result in institutionalized and therefore more enduring regimes. Dictators need to be saved from themselves. In contemporary electoral authoritarian regimes, institutions of participation such as elections and legislatures, even if severely limited, can play an important role in greater institutionalization.
The “Politics of Survival” in Mobutu’s Zaire

Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), under the dictatorship of Gen. Mobutu Sese Seko (r. 1965–1997), was a classic case of a corrupt, personalist regime in a weak state. His long rule shows the ability of a personalist dictator to survive, especially when he has external support, but it also demonstrates that a personalist dictator who does not allow real institutions to emerge ultimately is weak and in danger of being overthrown.

Mobutu came to power via a U.S.-supported military coup in the midst of a civil war and created the formal structures of a one-party state, as many personalist dictators do to try to limit factionalism among the elite. But he never allowed the party and other institutions any real autonomy or strength; his rule was always very personalist. As most personalist dictators do, he created a militia made up of close followers from his home area and personally loyal to him as a counterweight to the national army. All power and all major decisions went through him, and personal loyalty and patronage were the key elements of survival. To maintain personalist rule, he had to severely weaken virtually all institutions by following the logic of what political scientist Joel Migdal (1988) termed “the politics of survival.”

Strong institutions can be sources of regime strength and longevity if the supreme leader is willing or forced to allow them. A personalist regime is one in which the leader has managed to avoid that, perhaps to his short-term advantage of maintaining total power. In the long term, though, he comes to fear any potential source of opposition, including from those who control whatever institutions exist. Subordinates who lead state agencies can gain political support, potentially threatening the supreme leader, because they can solve people’s problems or provide them valuable resources. Personalist leaders resist the logic of allowing limited institutionalization in order to co-opt opposition. Instead, they undermine institutions by, for example, frequently shuffling subordinates so that they can’t build a following.

Mobutu was a master of this kind of politics. He ruled first and foremost by patronage, creating a regime that many referred to as a “kleptocracy,” or rule by theft. A government appointment was a license to steal. He also shuffled personnel frequently, removing potential rivals from office only to return them to power shortly afterward. A famous case involved Nguza Karl-i-Bond, foreign minister and then head of the ruling party in the mid-1970s. After being mentioned as a possible successor to Mobutu, he was accused of treason in 1977, imprisoned, and tortured. A year later, Mobutu forgave him and restored him to the prominent office of state commissioner. Then, in 1981, Nguza fled into exile in Belgium, denounced Mobutu for his corruption and brutality, and even testified against him before the U.S. Congress. In 1986, however, Mobutu once again forgave him, and Nguza returned to Zaire to a hero’s welcome; shortly afterward he was named to the prestigious position of ambassador to the United States. Examples like this proved to all that Mobutu could take people from a top position to prison and back again in the blink of an eye.

The politics of survival (along with generous Western support during the Cold War) kept Mobutu in power for three decades but weakened all institutions in Zaire. Even basic infrastructure declined as the state’s resources and capabilities collapsed. When Mobutu’s neighbor and ally, Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, was...
facing an armed insurrection in the early 1990s, Mobutu is alleged to have told him, “Your problem is you built roads. They are coming down those roads to get you.” Mobutu did not make that mistake: Zaire’s road network deteriorated to almost nothing under his rule. Nonetheless, rebel forces eventually forced the aging Mobutu out of power, after the end of the Cold War deprived him of Western support. Without external support and lacking resources for patronage, loyalty to him evaporated, as did his regime and even his chosen name for his country.

Elections, Parties, and Legislatures

In electoral authoritarian regimes, the legislative branch and the elections and political parties that are part of it can help overcome the dictator’s dilemma and provide greater stability. Even if the legislature has little power over policy and elections allow little actual competition, they can serve to provide information on local problems, regime support, and opposition; co-opt potential regime opponents; and provide at least a sheen of democratic legitimacy, domestically and internationally. If the legislature has any real power or elections permit any real competition, though, they could threaten the supreme leaders’ power and perhaps the regime itself, so once again the question is, Why do these regimes increasingly allow parties, elections, and legislatures to exist?

Regimes that come to power on the basis of a preexisting political party tend to be united, as noted above, and will understandably use their party to rule the country, whether they allow other parties or not. Parties and legislatures provide offices to use as patronage to maintain the loyalty of local-level and regional elites. Mexico’s PRI politicians operated on the basis of patronage, and citizens in rural regions in particular understood that votes for the PRI could result in material benefits for their communities. Similarly, membership in the Communist Party is usually a prerequisite for many jobs in any communist regime. Top leaders also try to use ruling parties to implement their policies at the local level. Communist regimes have cells in government agencies, communities, and major organizations, such as state-run companies, to monitor policy implementation and regime loyalty.

Leaders in more factionalized regimes that did not come to power on the basis of a previously existing party, though, also create parties in some cases. As with other institutions, this is most likely when there is a relative balance of power between the supreme leader and other key elites, giving both sides incentives to allow some institutionalized restraints on their power. If either side is significantly more powerful than the other, however, the more powerful side will resist the institutionalized limits a ruling party might impose (Reuter 2017). A ruling party and its patronage opportunities build a base of support for the supreme leader and regularized access to the state’s resources for other elites. Elections provide opportunities to spread patronage more widely among the population. Even in regimes where elections are not competitive, government spending goes up (Geddes et al. 2018).

Given these advantages of a ruling party, why would a regime allow competition that could threaten it? Once again, the dictator’s dilemma provides the answer. Top leaders face a principal–agent problem as they try to ensure that local leaders in the ruling party provide them accurate information and implement polices
correctly. Local leaders can benefit from opportunities for corruption that can undermine regime policies. They also have an incentive to hide bad news from top leaders for fear of losing their positions. Electoral competition from other parties can help rectify this. Competition incentivizes local leaders to provide resources and services to their constituents, potentially reducing corruption. Because opposition parties can voice local grievances that ruling party officials may prefer to hide from top leaders, the latter have an incentive to try to fix those problems. At the local level, the success of opposition parties can provide valuable information to top leaders.

Competition also helps ensure that the ruling party has local leaders with some basis of support. In Kenya’s one-party state in the 1960s and early 1970s, individual legislators—typically leaders of local ethnic groups who won competitive elections within the sole, ruling party—were able to voice limited criticisms of the government, work on behalf of their constituents to gain resources for their home areas, and use their access to government to gain direct benefits for themselves and their closest associates via corruption. They became regional elites with some modicum of real support, spokesmen for their areas with access to the top leadership of the government. The parliament clearly served as a mechanism of co-optation and, occasionally, of limited policy discussion. When MPs criticized the dictator too much, though, he and his successor clamped down, and regime stability suffered. By the 1980s, the regime faced a coup attempt and an active underground opposition movement, and in the 1990s, it was forced to open up the regime to opposition parties, which finally took power via an election in 2002.

As noted above, in the post–Cold War world, allowing limited opposition, elections, and a legislature can provide some domestic and international legitimacy to the regime. Legislatures at times can actually provide a space in which policy compromise can occur: opposition groups can make their demands with less confrontation, and dictators can compromise without seeming to capitulate when they do so in the context of electoral institutions. Electoral authoritarian regimes spend less money on the military, have greater respect for human rights (Gandhi 2008), spend more on health care, and have lower child mortality than do authoritarian regimes that allow no opposition (Geddes et al. 2018), indicating that they are more responsive to their citizens and presumably more accepted by them as legitimate.

Even competitive elections for the executive—competition for the supreme leader—can be beneficial to a regime. Successful campaigns and elections demonstrate the supreme leader’s continued strength and support (Geddes et al. 2018). During elections and at other times, regimes use large rallies and praise for the leader to show their strength. When Mexico’s Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) ruled as an electoral authoritarian regime, supporters would be trucked in from the countryside to rallies in the cities, where they would enjoy free food, drink, and entertainment. Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe (1992) called such huge but empty displays the “banality of power.” Svolik (2012), however, argued that they actually serve a clear purpose by demonstrating the ruling party’s strength and providing a warning to potential rivals.

Opposition electoral success, though, cannot be too strong, or it will threaten the regime’s hold on power. This requires the regime to keep competition within certain limits. For this reason, many regimes do allow competition for the legislature but not for the executive, keeping the supreme leader beyond possible threat. But many other options also exist to limit the regime’s risk of losing power. Rulers will certainly engage in electoral fraud if necessary, but more sophisticated and institutionalized systems do not usually require outright voter fraud to keep the ruling party in power. Usually, some combination of the type of electoral system (typically a majoritarian
one that favors the already large ruling party), gerrymandering constituency boundaries, vote buying, controlling access to the media, restricting civil liberties, using government resources for partisan purposes, and jailing opponents serve to keep the opposition under control. In Kenya in the 1990s, government civil servants openly campaigned for the ruling party during work hours, candidates handed potential voters gifts of cash or food, and opposition party rallies were denied permits or harassed by police. In Rwanda’s 2010 presidential election, three opposition candidates ended up in jail by election day on various charges, allowing President Paul Kagame, in power since the genocide in 1994, to win 93 percent of the vote.

All electoral authoritarian regimes limit competition, but how much and how successfully they limit it varies. Regimes with an alternative basis for legitimacy—notably monarchies—and regimes that control significant natural resources such as oil have less incentive to allow elections at all. Yonatan Morse (2018) argued that, in Africa, ruling parties with well-institutionalized and long-standing ties to the citizenry can easily win elections and so allow relatively open ones to occur, while weaker ruling parties must limit and manipulate elections in order to stay in power. Stronger, more united opposition parties might also force the regime to allow greater competition.

Political scientists originally saw electoral authoritarian regimes as temporary, likely to revert to more closed authoritarian rule or to democracy, but it’s become clear that they are here to stay for some time. Figure 8.3 shows the growing share of authoritarian regimes that allow elections and the correlation between allowing elections and staying in power. Milan Svolik (2012) demonstrated that authoritarian regimes with strong ruling parties, whether ruling alone or allowing some limited opposition, survive longer than regimes without parties. In the post–Cold War world, most of these regimes are electoral authoritarian, allowing a modicum of opposition but nonetheless maintaining power.

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**FIGURE 8.3**

Electoral Authoritarian Institutions and Regime Durability, 1951–2008

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Clientelism and Civil Society

Patronage to co-opt rival elites, often via ruling parties, is a central element of authoritarian regimes’ survival. Not surprisingly, then, clientelism is a central means through which citizens participate in politics. Electoral authoritarian regimes provide some limited institutionalized means of participation, but the purpose of participation is often to gain positions and access to patronage, since only very limited policy impact is possible. In personalist and less-institutionalized regimes, even these avenues are mostly cut off. By becoming an individual client of a powerful patron, citizens can gain access to some resources, power, or influence. This occurs behind closed doors, of course, but as the patron gains power and position in the system, the clients gain also through special privileges and access to resources.

In the absence of other effective means of participation and representation, following a patron may be the best available option. A patron can represent a client’s most immediate interests vis-à-vis the state. The problems in this type of system, though, are numerous. First, its informality means that no client is ever guaranteed anything. Each individual has a unique and largely private relationship with a patron, who will try to maintain the client’s loyalty in the long term but who will not respond to every demand. Clients have no recourse unless an alternative patron is available. This is sometimes the case, but transferring loyalty is never easy or quick. Second, clientelism discourages citizens from organizing on the basis of collective interests. As long as citizens believe that following a personal patron is the most effective route to obtaining what they need from government, they have little incentive to organize collectively to change the government and its policies more broadly, with profound implications for civil society.

Even in authoritarian regimes that allow it to exist, civil society is extremely circumscribed and repressed. Civil society in a democracy, at least ideally, operates in a public sphere in which open debate is possible with few legal constraints on speech and nonviolent political action, even if cultural norms limit what is considered “acceptable” speech and actions. Civil society in authoritarian regimes must operate in what Alexander Dukalskis (2017) calls an “authoritarian public sphere.” This is a public sphere tightly controlled and monitored by an authoritarian regime that uses it to try to gain legitimacy. The regime propagates messages that show their rule as all-powerful and inevitable, frame it as beneficial for the nation as a whole, and limit negative images of the regime. Some individuals and groups in civil society nonetheless try to challenge that by introducing alternative narratives and information when possible via “underground” and often anonymous media, personal narrative and rumor, protests when possible, and, most recently and often powerfully, the Internet and social media. Regardless of how many people actually believe the regime’s propaganda, the authoritarian sphere can enhance regime legitimacy and stability simply by limiting alternative ideas.

Communist regimes such as the Soviet Union and China at their heights were totalitarian, as North Korea remains today. Totalitarian regimes completely eliminate civil society—the ruling party “represents” all interests that it believes deserve representation. Trade unions or youth or women’s groups often nominally exist, but these mass organizations are always part of the Communist Party. They cannot be truly part of civil society, which by definition is autonomous from the state.
Noncommunist regimes often use state corporatism to control interest groups. Remember that corporatism is the idea that each component (or interest) in society should be represented by one organization. When a government legally mandates this, it is referred to as state corporatism because the state controls the interest groups and chooses the ones it wishes to recognize. Mexico’s electoral authoritarian regime under the PRI was a classic example. The PRI recognized and included within the party a single labor organization, a single peasant association, and a single association for “popular groups”—small businesses, women’s interests, and various others. These organizations were meant to represent their constituents within the party. Over time, however, they became increasingly corrupt and controlled by the elite at the top of the party hierarchy. The workers’ organization, in particular, was very powerful within the party, and real wages rose for most of the PRI’s long rule, even though the unions rarely contradicted official party policies. In most of Asia and Africa, unions and other major interest groups arose with and were part of nationalist movements for independence. After independence, however, authoritarian regimes emasculated these organizations, often creating state corporatist systems in their place.

Often, observers assume that civil society, when not obviously controlled by a ruling party, will inherently resist authoritarian rule, but this is not always the case. Organizations in civil society need to survive if they hope to benefit their members, and cooperating with the regime even when not legally required to may be the best way to achieve that aim. Accepting regime patronage and therefore supporting the regime may gain organizations access to resources for their members, while a principled opposition in the name of democracy may prevent them from achieving anything (Jamal 2007). Religious organizations, for instance, often cooperate with authoritarian regimes to gain regularized status and material rewards, and authoritarian leaders may be willing to cooperate with them in order to gain prestige and possible legitimacy by association, especially when a particular religion has deep social roots, such as the Russian Orthodox Church (Koesel 2014).

Using our case study of China, Jessica Teets (2014) argued that this dynamic is producing a new model of state–civil society relations—“consultative authoritarianism”—that combines elements of liberal autonomy and state corporatism. Authoritarian regimes, she argued, increasingly allow civil society groups to operate to improve overall governance by helping overcome the dictator’s dilemma and by providing services directly. On the other hand, the regimes must ensure civil society stays within certain bounds to maintain regime control. They use a combination of positive and negative incentives to do so, minimizing repression to the extent possible. The result is improved governance for citizens on a daily basis but little chance that civil society will foster regime change toward democracy.

With civil society circumscribed, average citizens often find it rational to pursue individual clientelist relationships in order to participate and survive in authoritarian regimes. At times, though, grievances grow and opportunities for broader participation emerge, especially in electoral authoritarian regimes that allow some degree of openness. The emergence of truly independent social movements is often one of the first signs of a democratic opening. In Latin America in the 1970s, labor-based social movements outside the confines of the official corporatist unions began challenging the status quo and ultimately forced authoritarian regimes to move toward democratization, a subject we turn to in chapter 9.
CASE STUDY

China: From Communist to Modernizing Authoritarian Rule

China has transformed itself from a communist regime with strong personalist overtones under Mao into a modernizing authoritarian regime that has substantially institutionalized its rule. In the process, it has become much more stable and predictable. The opening of the market economy has required the party to allow greater participation, but it has nonetheless kept demands for fundamental reform effectively repressed. The co-opting of key elites into the ruling party, the creation of state corporatist regulation of civil society, and the use of repression when necessary have kept large-scale protest to a minimum since the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989. Corruption, though, demonstrates that co-opting potential opposition is an important survival strategy for the Chinese regime. Since 2012, President Xi Jinping has increased repression, anticorruption efforts, and the party’s ideological propaganda to gain greater control over the party and attempt to gain greater legitimacy. Some fear that the charismatic president is also personalizing power, possibly reversing some of the successful institutionalization of the last decades. Democracy advocates hope that the initial expansion of participation will ultimately yield greater pressure toward real democratic reform, though the regime under President Xi seems to be moving decisively in the opposite direction.

REGIME TYPE One-party, modernizing authoritarian

INSTITUTIONALIZATION Greatly increased in top leadership, judiciary, civilian control of military; increased personalization under President Xi

SUCCESSION Regularized and signaled in advance from within ruling party elite; uncertain under Xi

PARITIES AND ELECTIONS Continued one-party rule but changing party membership; technocrats, entrepreneurs, and lawyers; minimally competitive local elections

CIVIL SOCIETY Expansion but under state corporatism; growing local protests, labor unrest, online activism, and NGOs; growing repression since 2013

In November 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held the biggest event on its calendar—the Party Congress, which happens once every five years. It anointed Xi Jinping as the new supreme leader, electing him general secretary of the party and head of the military commission; he was duly appointed president of the country a few months later. Xi’s rise to the top was not a surprise; the prior Party Congress in 2007 clearly signaled Xi’s position as the next leader by appointing him vice president, among other posts. The long process demonstrated the opaque but nonetheless predictable succession process that began in the 1990s. It represents an institutionalization of the authoritarian regime that is part of the reason why it has survived so long and so well. The Party Congress on the surface is all about uniformity, with nearly unanimous votes on every issue and leader. But the united face shown to the public is the product of months of jockeying among key leaders to get their people into top positions. Xi’s ascension was a carefully orchestrated compromise between the two prior supreme leaders and their followers; his vice president is from the opposing faction. Institutionalization co-opts all major political elites to maintain unity. Whether Xi will allow this institutionalized succession process to continue, though, is unclear.

Origins

China’s communist regime has been in power since 1949 but has changed profoundly since Mao’s death in 1976. Though communist in name, in practice China has become a modernizing authoritarian regime by successfully encouraging state-led, capitalist
development while maintaining a firm one-party hold on political power via greater institutionalization and a mix of repression and co-optation. This is a far cry from the early days of the regime. Communist rule under Mao developed into a full-blown personality cult. Mao’s rule, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), undermined most institutions. The regime was increasingly personalist and obedient to the whims of the aging Mao. CCP membership was the essential and only formal route into the political process beyond the most local levels. Party membership was also the sole road ambitious citizens could travel to political, social, or economic success. Yet fewer than 10 percent of citizens were party members, which meant that most people who wanted to influence the government had to do so in informal ways via patron–client relationships. With the complete ban on any independent organizations, citizens had little ability to demand changes in government policy or to petition the government about issues of concern.

**Governing: Trying to Resolve the Dictator’s Dilemma**

Upon Mao’s death, his successor, Deng Xiaoping, (1978–1989), seems to have deliberately set out to create a more institutionalized system of rule. His reforms were embodied in a new constitution in 1982, which was significantly amended in 1999. Authority remains vested first and foremost in the ruling party, which fuses executive and legislative functions. As Figure 8.4 shows, each key governing institution has a parallel party institution. The National Party Congress is the official decision-making body of the party, and the National People’s Congress is the equivalent of the legislature. Both institutions are ostensibly elected by provincial and local bodies, but in reality, the higher organs ensure that only candidates loyal to the ruling party are selected. Real power lies in the party’s politburo and even more so in the smaller Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). The State Council and its Standing Committee are in effect the cabinet that actually runs the government, overseen by the politburo and PSC.

Greater institutionalization is perhaps most apparent in leadership succession. Upon Mao’s death in 1976, a two-year battle for leadership, typical of a personalist dictatorship, ensued.

Chinese president Xi Jinping, center, speaks during a meeting of the Chinese Community Party’s politburo. Since Mao’s death, China has created an increasingly institutionalized, modernizing authoritarian regime. By all accounts, the politburo rules somewhat collectively, though Xi has amassed more power and personal following than his recent predecessors, leading some analysts to fear a personalization of power that could undermine institutionalization.

Xinhua/Li Xueren via Getty Images
Ultimately, Deng and his allies emerged victorious, launching China on its current path. Deng anointed Jiang Zemin as his successor and systematically began transferring power to him in 1989. In 2003 the transfer of power became regularized, as Jiang chose Hu Jintao as his successor, though Jiang continued to be influential. Generational change in the broader leadership has also come to be a hallmark of Party Congresses: the Central Committee elected at each Party Congress routinely includes about 60 percent new members, with each Party Congress seeing a significant shift toward younger and more highly educated members (Shambaugh 2008, 153).

There has always been one supreme leader who is simultaneously president, general secretary of the party, and chair of the Central Military Commission, though he does not rule alone. While the workings of the politburo and the PSC are secret, all reports suggest that a great deal of open discussion occurs within these highest organs of power, and their members represent all important factions among the top elite. With Hu’s elevation to the top leadership, two major factions emerged: those with backgrounds in the party’s youth league, through which Hu rose and who are supported by leaders from inland and poorer regions, and those from the wealthier, coastal areas, collectively known as the “Shanghai gang” (Li and White 2006). The two factions have split power very evenly since 2007 in terms of membership in the top decision-making organs. Li (2010) saw the factional balance serving as an informal system of checks and balances on the top rulers as they limit one another’s power and, therefore, the power of the supreme leader. The succession of Hu to replace Jiang and the subsequent succession of Xi (a member of the Shanghai faction) to
replace Hu may also be establishing a norm of shifting the leadership between the factions. As the charismatic President Xi gained power and popularity, however, most analysts argued he was amassing greater personal power than any leader since Deng, potentially threatening the collective leadership (Minzner 2015). Xi broke with past precedent by not revealing his successor at the 2017 Party Congress, which also amended the constitution to remove presidential term limits, fueling speculation that Xi might try to hold power longer than the two terms that have become the norm.

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**The Decline of Communism**

**NUMBER OF ONE-PARTY COMMUNIST STATES IN 1975: SIXTEEN**

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<td>China</td>
<td>Romania</td>
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<td>Cuba</td>
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**NUMBER OF ONE-PARTY COMMUNIST STATES IN 2019: FIVE**

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In addition to the party leadership, the military has long been a crucial faction in Chinese politics but also has been subordinate to the civilian leadership of the party. The vast majority of the army—and certainly all of its top leaders—are ruling party members, trained to support the party and its ideals. Few military leaders have been in the top organs of the country’s leadership since the 1990s, and while the military has channels to let its voice be heard, it does so primarily in areas of direct relevance to it such as defense and foreign policy. The army remains an important faction behind the scenes, but the top leadership seems to have institutionalized effective civilian control over it, eliminating a potential threat to survival that is common in authoritarian regimes.

The judiciary has also been significantly institutionalized, though the Chinese legal system still does not include the basic rights familiar to Western citizens. The Supreme People’s
CHAPTER 8  AUTHORITARIAN INSTITUTIONS

Court, the country’s highest court, has the right to interpret the law and the constitution but not to overturn decisions of the National Congress. As always, the party remains supreme over all. Trials are now supposed to be open to the public, and most are, but the government still prevents the public from attending high-profile political cases. The trial of the popular regional leader Bo Xilai on corruption charges in 2013 included the public release of edited transcripts, the highest level of transparency in a major political trial up to that time.

A 1989 reform of administrative law increased citizens’ ability to take local government agencies to court for not doing their job properly. A broad survey found rapidly growing use of and trust in courts among Chinese citizens in the new millennium, especially for handling civil disputes (Landry 2008). By the early 2000s, the courts became overwhelmed, and the central government issued an order to reduce the number of cases accepted; therefore, Chinese citizens with complaints against local government took petitions directly to authorities rather than trying to sue. In response, the Supreme Court announced a five-year plan in 2014 to improve court efficiency and streamline processes; the number of court cases since has increased, suggesting some success of this effort. One impetus for reform is foreign investors who do not have the political connections to gain special treatment; a study examining where and why courts have been strengthened argued that stronger courts and rule of law exist primarily for civil and economic law in order to meet those demands and attract foreign investors (Wong 2013).

China has significantly institutionalized its regime, but the government is still willing to use repression when necessary. Bruce Dickson (2016) argued that China has a long history of easing and tightening repression as needed to control problems at minimal cost. The latest tightening, he argued, began in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics and accelerated once Xi became president. Crackdowns against human rights activists and others increased significantly as the Olympics approached. The government also increased restrictions in Tibet, a region whose populace desires greater autonomy or independence, and among the Muslim, Turkic-speaking Uyghur minority in Xinjiang. Sporadic violence, most recently in 2014, seems to stem from separatist demands based on resentment against perceived religious and cultural restrictions and income inequality, but there is no single agenda or unified Uyghur insurgency. China detained an estimated 800,000 to two million Uyghurs in “re-education centers” in 2018, according to the U.S. State Department. China says the camps are “vocational training centers” and are a “necessary counterterror measure” (Hollingsworth 2019). The government is also reportedly using advanced facial recognition technology through a growing network of surveillance cameras to track Uyghurs not only in Xinjiang but also in a number of large cities outside the province, and local governments’ “demand for such capabilities is spreading” (Mozur 2019). The Uyghur province is rich in minerals and on the strategically and economically important route to Central Asia; many view the Chinese state’s repression of the Uyghurs as an effort to secure central control over the area for these reasons.

Use of surveillance cameras and other technology, though, goes well beyond tracking the Uyghur minority. China now has an estimated 200 million cameras around the country to literally watch the population—one camera for every seven people (Economy 2019). It initiated a “social credit” system in 2014 that aims to include every citizen by 2020. This is a vast network of data collection that gives citizens “social credit” for positive behavior and statements of any type, including online, and demerits for poor behavior, whether economic, such as failing to repay loans, or political. Along with growing collection of citizens’ DNA and facial recognition technology, the system raises the possibility of using “Big Data” and artificial intelligence to gather, retain, and use information on each citizen to ensure their behavior comports with regime edicts to a degree never before possible in human history (Qiang 2019).

Parties and Elections

China has not permitted an open opposition party, but it has institutionalized and expanded participation within the ruling party. Membership in the Communist Party itself has changed,
as the growing market economy has produced new elites that must be co-opted. After the country’s opening to the world market, farmers’ and workers’ share of party membership dropped from 63 percent in 1994 to 44 percent in 2003. Large numbers of scientists, engineers, and other intellectuals have joined the party. By 1997, technocrats made up about three-quarters of top Chinese leaders, a share that has since shrunk as they have been replaced by the two newest additions: lawyers and entrepreneurs. In 2001 the party leadership decided to allow private entrepreneurs, including successful capitalists, into the Communist Party, the ultimate irony (Dickson 2003). By 2011, an estimated 40 percent of Chinese entrepreneurs were party members. With the booming economy, it has become quite clear as well that party membership is a key means of patronage and co-optation: “90 percent of China’s millionaires are the children of high-ranking officials” (Saich 2013, 110).

The political implications of these changes are not clear. Given the development of liberalism in the West, we might expect that allowing intellectuals and especially entrepreneurs to enter the political system would expand democracy; the bourgeoisie, after all, was the class that helped create liberalism in Europe. Dickson (2003), however, surveyed China’s new entrepreneurs and found that their political attitudes do not suggest they will help expand democracy. In fact, they share the concerns of other party officials about limiting participation to the elite in order to maintain stability. Chen and Lu (2011) surveyed middle-class citizens more broadly and found similar results. They did not have a particularly strong preference for democracy, and the more economically dependent they were on the state, the less support they showed for democracy. The World Values Survey, on the other hand, found that 71 percent of Chinese thought democracy was “very good” or “fairly good,” and those with university educations, who would likely be middle class, supported it even more strongly, at least in principle (McAllister and White 2018). While the evidence remains ambiguous, the CCP so far seems to have opened up the party to the intellectual and business elite without risking its continued control.

Changes to the electoral system for local-level congresses have provided opportunities for voter participation and representation within the strict confines of the ruling party. Following typically Communist practices, China long had direct elections for the most local level of government—village committees—but with only one party-approved candidate for each position. Today, candidates can be nominated by the party, other local organizations, or any group of ten citizens. Studies have shown that how this system actually works in practice varies greatly because local officials often severely limit the level of competition. Estimates are that the elections are actually competitive in about half of the country. Hundreds of thousands of candidates have lost village elections since 1999, and 48 percent of elected village officials are not Communist Party members (Landry, Davis, and Wang 2010, 766). One survey in the late 1990s found that more than half of voters had attended a campaign event and nearly 20 percent had participated in nominating a candidate (Shi 2006, 365).

Melanie Manion (2015) surveyed members of local congresses and voters and argued that while local congresses remain firmly under the control of the ruling party, local representatives nonetheless are able to provide the party with knowledge of local concerns, and local party leaders are often responsive to these concerns because their career advancement requires maintaining social stability; any local concerns that result in larger and more public demands can threaten an official’s career. Voters attempt to choose candidates they think will honestly represent local interests and help bring government investment to the area. The Chinese ruling party has clearly tried to use local elections to help resolve the dictator’s dilemma, providing them with information about local concerns without undermining their continued rule.

Civil Society

Under full Communist rule, the party completely controlled civil society. The modernizing authoritarian regime no longer has complete control but nonetheless maintains an
authoritarian public sphere that limits civil society in various ways and has become more restrictive under President Xi Jinping. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), for instance, was the sole legal union in the Maoist era, with mandatory branches in any enterprise with more than one hundred employees. The rapid expansion of private enterprises has made it difficult for the party to maintain its monopoly on union organization, but the ACFTU remains tightly controlled by and supportive of the government. A revised labor law enacted in 2008 made arbitration and court cases by workers easier. The number of such cases more than doubled, and in the most industrialized regions, the system is overwhelmed with cases. Lee and Friedman (2009) argued that, as in other countries around the world, the opening of the economy to globalization reduced workers’ ability to secure the growing rights that the government formally granted them. Forty percent of urban workers were part-time, casual, or temporary employees who have great difficulty demanding better treatment; nearly half of them reported not receiving wages on time.

In 2010, several major strikes erupted, most notably at Honda and Toyota plants. As the Chinese economy rebounded after the Great Recession of 2007–2009, it became clear that its seemingly endless stream of cheap labor was running out. Employers were starting to face labor shortages, and wages were rising in some areas, giving some workers the economic strength to strike and demand more. At the Honda plant in Foshan, workers unsuccessfully demanded the right to form their own independent union. Major strikes in Guangzhou footwear factories in 2014 and 2015 were successful in achieving their goals, but a few months later the government arrested key leaders.

The number of officially registered NGOs in China more than tripled between 2000 and 2012, to about half a million (Dickson 2016, 125). To control these organizations, the government created a registration system for NGOs and approved only one organization of a particular type in each administrative area, in effect beginning a system of state corporatism. As the government became more comfortable with its ability to control NGOs, it allowed more than one focused on the same issue to register in an area and eliminated the requirement that each one have a government agency as sponsor. Teets (2014) saw these as key signs of the emergence of her new model of state–civil society relations, consultative authoritarianism.

Under President Xi, though, the government has cracked down further, particularly on political NGOs. A new law in 2016 required the seven thousand foreign NGOs to register with the government and reveal their funding sources, giving the government the potential to deny legal status to those it believed might threaten regime stability. It also restricted contact between foreign and Chinese NGOs and made it virtually impossible for the latter to get international funding. A similar law regulating religious organizations was passed in late 2016, limiting their contact with like-minded foreign groups and trying to ensure they register with the state. The state has also created its own organizations for the policy issues in which it is particularly interested; these are referred to by the Orwellian name “government-organized nongovernmental organizations” (GONGOs).

Bruce Dickson (2016) and others divide Chinese civil society into Civil Society I and Civil Society II. The former include the many NGOs focused on economic, cultural, sports, and charitable work; the latter are the more directly political groups that seek changes the regime sees as threatening. The former are often welcomed by local government and at times influence the direction of government policy, though mostly at the local level. Local
branches of the ACFTU have successfully supported workers’ strikes on a number of occasions, and the national organization helped to get a five-day workweek approved. Lu Yiyi (2009) studied urban NGOs providing social services and found that despite financial and informational dependence on the state, the NGOs can achieve a degree of autonomy, in part through their personal relationships with local bureaucrats who can protect them from the more draconian demands of the state. Indeed, she found that GONGOs actually achieve greater autonomy than citizen-initiated NGOs. Hildebrandt (2013) argued that NGO leaders limit their own demands to what they find politically acceptable in a particular locale and issue area in order to preserve their organizations and have what impact they can. Xi has restricted civil society further by requiring all NGOs to have a ruling party cell within them, whose job it is to act as a regime watchdog.

Even with the recent expansion of civil society, clientelism remains important. Networks of personal supporters, including but not exclusively family, are known as guanxi. Before, during, and since the Mao era, the Chinese have used their guanxi to survive and attempt to prosper. At the height of the communist system, the state controlled virtually the entire economy, including the allocation of jobs, houses, and other services. Appearing loyal to the regime was crucial to one’s success in the system, but guanxi helped a great deal as well. Relatives and friends in the system could help get you a better job or apartment or keep you out of trouble with local authorities. For the more ambitious, participation included becoming a member of and taking an active role in the local CCP apparatus in addition to using guanxi to help career advancement. While the reforms since 1980 have profoundly changed the system, guanxi have not disappeared.

Under Xi, the ruling party has returned to actively using the authoritarian public sphere to propagate an official ideology. In contrast to his immediate predecessors, Xi began making major ideological pronouncements shortly after gaining power. He has tried to rehabilitate Mao’s image by saying that both Mao’s and Deng’s eras were equally important in understanding China today. Xi has also expanded the role of nationalism and Confucianism as ideological supports for the regime. In 2017, the Party Congress enshrined Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism With Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (known simply as Xi Jinping Thought), in the constitution, as Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Thought were earlier. In 2019, the regime created a smart phone “app” of Xi Jinping Thought that is interactive. Citizens are expected to interact with it frequently and many fear punishment if they don’t.

Yet, while trying to revive ideology as a support for the regime, Xi has simultaneously faced new dilemmas. In the 2000s, legal and media reforms needed to encourage a market economy and the growth of the Internet combined to create the start of a “contentious public sphere” in which citizens, though still severely limited, were able to shape public opinion in ways critical of the government (Lei 2018). The market economy required the provision of some key legal rights, though certainly not the full set of civil and political rights common in democracies (see chapter 11), and marketization of the media required newspapers and broadcasters to create programming that would attract audiences in a competitive environment. These changes, Lei argued, facilitated the rise of legal and journalistic professionals that, while still severely restricted, created networks of opinion leaders to expand criticism of the regime. When Internet use began to expand in the mid-2000s, Internet companies hired these journalists to provide content for online news.

Chinese media expanded dramatically in the past generation. Professional journalists helped propagate online news that was critical of the regime when possible. The regime generally tolerates criticisms of local officials’ malfeasance in mainstream media because, like the role of the courts, the media’s criticism of local government helps the regime overcome the dictator’s dilemma by providing information about what is happening “on the ground” (Stockman 2012). But political criticism of the top leadership can result in harsh consequences. Xi has mandated ideological training for journalists. The government has arrested many professionals who dared to criticize the regime, including university faculty.
lawyers, and editors (Zhao 2016). In 2018 the international NGO, Reporters Without Borders, ranked China the fourth-worst country in the world on press freedom.

The biggest venue for criticism of the regime has been the Internet, and the government has created the so-called Great Firewall of China to prevent Internet users from accessing information on sensitive topics. Since a major speech by Xi in 2013, the regime has actively centralized and expanded its efforts to monitor and limit the Internet in particular, calling cybersecurity a key element of national security. A 2016 cybersecurity law required Internet service providers to provide data to the government upon request and Internet users to register all accounts with their real names to root out anonymous criticisms of the regime. An entire new profession of “public opinion analysts” has arisen, hired by the government to take on this task. The regime employs tens of thousands of cyberpolice and sophisticated security programs to constantly monitor Internet use and has eliminated virtually all of the major global Internet providers, such as Google, Facebook, and YouTube, replacing them with more easily controlled Chinese alternatives. Nonetheless, Chinese “netizens,” initially led by professional journalists, created active online communities and techniques to evade censorship. The latter included new Chinese-language characters that can make it past filtering systems, websites based on foreign servers, and meetings held in secret chat rooms. Lei Ya-Wen (2018) concluded that the government’s steps to control the media and Internet were only partially successful but nonetheless were curtailing the more “contentious public sphere” she saw arising a decade earlier.

Even though elections and civil society now offer opportunities for greater participation than in the past, there has been pressure for more fundamental changes. The most famous case is the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989. Within a week, small student demonstrations grew into daily protests by upwards of 200,000 students demanding government accountability, freedom for jailed dissidents, and freedom of the press, though they did not demand full competitive electoral democracy, as is often asserted. After making some minor concessions, the government declared martial law in the city and called in the army. At least a million citizens poured into the streets to try to prevent the army from entering the square but without success. In the middle of the night, the army opened fire on the remaining dissidents, killing between one thousand and three thousand students and civilians. Worldwide condemnation followed, but the regime survived.

This repression successfully eliminated most large-scale protests, but many local protests continue. An estimated 8,700 protests—what the Chinese government calls “mass incidents”—took place in 1993, by 2010, the number had risen to 180,000 (Fewsmith 2013, 26–27). A key organizational tool for protesters and petitioners is to get the ear of the central government via the media or dramatic acts, often referred to as “troublemaking.” The central government is often more willing to make concessions to the protesters than is local government and may even facilitate “troublemaking” to force local governments to act, because the central authorities are more concerned about the overall legitimacy of the system (Xi 2012). Locally focused protests—like local elections, courts, and the media—can provide the regime information to help overcome the dictator’s dilemma.

In 2019, opposition to a controversial extradition law led to months of massive demonstrations in Hong Kong, including forcing a shutdown of the airport for two days. Hong Kong retained its own political and legal systems, including the right to protest and freedom of the press and speech, when the British returned it to China’s jurisdiction in 1997. Those rights were supposed to be guaranteed for fifty years after the transfer. Many Hong Kong residents believe the government in Beijing is increasingly encroaching on those liberal rights, however. Meanwhile as protests continued and escalated throughout the summer, Beijing faced a grave dilemma over how far it could tolerate them and whether to use force as it had in Tiananmen to quell them. The government increasingly denounced the protesters as foreign-backed terrorists and criminals and asserted in August that it could and would declare a state of emergency if unrest continued.
Regime Stability and the Future

The Hong Kong protests notwithstanding, one of the biggest threats to the CCP is internal, namely corruption. The government’s legitimacy is now heavily based on its economic performance, which corruption directly damages. Dickson (2016) found via an extensive public opinion survey that rising personal incomes increased the regime’s popular support while personal experiences with corruption lowered it. A new practice since the 1990s is maiguan maiguan—the buying and selling of government positions, especially at the local level in less-developed regions. Joseph Feiwsmit (2013) argued that the CCP faces a classic principal-agent problem. The party leadership demands that local officials achieve economic growth while maintaining social stability. In the world’s largest country, however, much authority is left in the hands of local party leaders. As long as they deliver on the key items of growth and stability, they will please their superiors and earn promotions. Otherwise, they are free to pursue their own interests. This has produced corruption, personalization of power in the hands of local leaders who control promotions, and an expansion of local government.

The party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection is charged with ferreting out corruption within the party, and the Chinese leadership is emphasizing corruption eradication more strongly than in the past. President Xi launched a massive anticorruption crusade in 2013, which reached higher into the ruling elite than ever before and helped him purge potential internal opponents. By 2016, an estimated 300,000 people had faced corruption charges, including close to 150 high-level elites. The very top leadership itself had long been beyond accountability, until the case of Bo Xilai, a provincial party secretary and a rising star in the party. In 2012, one of Bo’s top aides was accused of massive corruption, and Bo’s wife was ultimately implicated in a murder that Bo may well have been trying to cover up. His very public removal from office exposed high-level intrigue and corruption in the party like nothing the country had yet witnessed.

Subsequently, former PSC and top military officials were convicted on corruption charges as well, as the elite increasingly worried that almost no one was safe from Xi’s campaign. Reducing corruption, though, poses risks itself. To the extent the regime relies on co-opting elites via corruption opportunities for support, it will only go so far in eliminating those opportunities. The anticorruption drive has made Xi personally very popular with average citizens, if not the elite. Combined with his ideological campaign, perhaps he will be able to maintain personal and regime power with less need for corruption. The anticorruption efforts seem to be having some effect: in 1995 Transparency International ranked China the fourth most corrupt country in the world, but by 2018, it was ranked eighty-seventh, in the middle of the global spectrum.

How far and how fast political reforms will go is probably the major question that political scientists looking at China ask. Teresa Wright (2010) used a political economy approach to argue that the regime has been more successful than many assume at maintaining its legitimacy. China’s economic policy, while creating much greater inequality than in the past, has nonetheless favored many segments of society. First and foremost, the regime has earned the support of budding entrepreneurs and professionals, who have gained great wealth under the reforms. In addition, workers in the private sector and even workers in the declining state-owned sector, who still have some social welfare protections from the state, fear that they would be worse off if the ruling party were no longer in power. In 2011 overall satisfaction with the central government stood at well over 80 percent, slightly down from 2009 but about where it has been for decades. Citizens reported higher levels of satisfaction with the central government than with local governments. At the same time, satisfaction with the most local level of government increased markedly from just over 40 percent in 2003 to over 60 percent in 2011 (Saich 2012). For a regime that has staked its legitimacy mainly on its ability to modernize the country, however, 80 percent approval ratings suggest a higher level of legitimacy than many outsiders might assume is the case. In 2013, Xi Jinping started a campaign within the party to warn members about key ideas that would undermine the
party’s grip on power. At the top of the list were “constitutional democracy” and “universal human rights.” Clearly, the current leadership has no intention of yielding to demands for democracy anytime soon, and outside of Hong Kong, it isn’t clear that many demands would be forthcoming in any case.

Case Questions

1. What does China’s succession system suggest about the relationship between personal power, succession, and regime survival in authoritarian regimes?

2. The Chinese government has allowed participation and criticism at the local level in various ways but repressed it firmly at the national level. Can you use the idea of the dictator’s dilemma to explain this pattern of behavior?

3. How can the theories of authoritarian rule outlined earlier in the chapter be used to explain the durability of China’s regime?

CASE STUDY

Russia: Creating an Electoral Authoritarian Regime

Vladimir Putin transformed what was a chaotic electoral democracy into an electoral authoritarian regime. While Russia was rated only as “Partly Free” by Freedom House in the 1990s, it shifted to “Not Free” in 2005, where it has remained. Putin manipulated the formal rules of a weakly institutionalized semipresidential system to cement his power. Crucial to this, though, was the loyalty of the security apparatus out of which he arose and his ability to use growing state revenue from mineral exports to co-opt opponents and reward allies. A dominant ruling party and manipulation of the electoral system are also key means through which Putin maintains power and rewards loyal allies with government positions. Civil society has been relatively weak. While many organizations exist, few have sustained memberships and funding. Protests, however, have increased, culminating in a huge demonstration in 2011–2012, the largest since the end of the Soviet Union. In spite of these, the regime has held on to power while granting relatively few concessions.

CASE SUMMARY

- REGIME TYPE Electoral authoritarian
- INSTITUTIONALIZATION Regular though fraudulent elections, manipulation of constitution to ensure executive power, selective use of anticorruption laws
- SUCCESSION Putin observed two-term limit as president but retained informal power and returned to the presidency after one term as prime minister
- PARITIES AND ELECTIONS Dominant ruling party with weak opposition parties; manipulation of electoral rules
- CIVIL SOCIETY Weak organizations but growing protests

In the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, Russia’s autocratic leader, Vladimir Putin, became a contentious topic of debate. He had increased Russia’s role in world affairs significantly, often in ways the U.S. government opposed: Russian hackers had allegedly stolen and released Democratic Party emails, and Republican candidate Donald Trump openly admired Putin as a “strong leader” while Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton portrayed him as a brutal tyrant. To many, it appeared that a new Cold War was developing, with an
authoritarian Russia, consolidated by Putin since his first election in 2000, once again the nemesis of the United States.

**Origins**

Putin inherited the semipresidential system depicted in Figure 8.5. As discussed in chapter 5, the Russian version of semipresidentialism gave exceptional power to the president. The parliament, or Duma, had to reject the president’s nominee for prime minister three times before it would be official. If it did so, parliament would be dissolved and new elections held, a clear incentive to support the president’s choice. Beyond that, the president and prime minister had nearly unchecked powers of appointment of cabinet ministers and other key officials and could issue laws by decree when parliament did not pass a piece of legislation. Putin’s predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, ultimately became a very weak president in spite of his formal powers. He ruled largely via his decree powers and was informally dependent on the wealthy oligarchs who captured control of major companies during the chaotic transition from a state-planned to a market economy. The demise of the Soviet Union allowed regional leaders to control crucial resources, and Yeltsin’s unwillingness to invest in a ruling party undermined the possibility of an institutionalized form of rule (Reuter 2017). By the end of the twentieth century, an ailing Yeltsin had virtually no popular support and was increasingly ineffective. Facing a destabilizing battle for his succession among several close aides, in 1999 Yeltsin anointed the relatively unknown Vladimir Putin as his successor and resigned from office so Putin could run as an incumbent in the 2000 presidential election.

**FIGURE 8.5**

Russia’s Governing Institutions
Governing: Trying to Resolve the Dictator's Dilemma

Putin, a former KGB agent who led the security apparatus under Yeltsin, would prove to be a much stronger president than his predecessor. He came to office in auspicious times. The transition to a market economy in the 1990s caused years of economic decline and hardship until a full-blown crisis in August 1998. In the aftermath of that, however, and supported by a rapid rise in the price of oil, Russia's top export, the economy started to stabilize, and by 2000, economic growth reached 5 percent, for the first time in a decade at least, the average Russian's income was going up, not down. Upon assuming office, Putin announced goals of establishing order, increasing the strength of the state, and furthering market-oriented economic reforms. After a decade of chaos and weakness, the public was ready for order and strength, and Putin won the 2000 election with 53 percent of the vote in the first round.

Putin successfully undermined the power of both the parliament and regional governments in his first few years in office (see chapter 9 for details). This helped him reduce resistance to the changes he made to federalism, outlined in chapter 5; replacing elected governors with ones appointed by him; creating “presidential representatives” overseeing seven large regions across the country; and gaining complete control of the upper chamber of the parliament, which became a rubber stamp for his proposals. As the economy boomed, revenue poured into the central state's coffers as well, which Putin distributed to regions based on their political loyalty, also removing any opposition to his gutting of federalism.

As all authoritarian rulers, Putin has used repression and co-optation when needed to maintain his power. This is particularly clear in his treatment of key economic players. He systematically replaced Yeltsin's supporters with his own allies, primarily from the security services, throughout the state. He attempted to co-opt the “oligarchs” who were powerful under Yeltsin, but when he couldn’t, he used his control over the judiciary to jail them or force them in to exile (see chapter 9). His allies or the state itself would then take ownership of key industries, especially natural resources, a key source of patronage and revenue.

Facing a constitutional limit of two terms as president, Putin anointed as his successor Dmitry Medvedev, who was duly elected president in May 2008. Putin himself became PM and head of his ruling party in the Duma but unofficially remained the supreme leader of the country. While some observers thought Medvedev might gain real power and chart a more liberal path than Putin’s, after one term as prime minister, Putin and Medvedev agreed to switch roles, with Putin running for and winning the presidency in 2012 and Medvedev returning to the prime minister position. Before returning to the presidency, though, Putin had the constitution amended to lengthen the presidential term to two six-year terms, allowing him to remain president to 2024.

Parties and Elections

Political scientists Hans Verheul and Ruben Verheul (2006) argued that the most important party in Russia has long been the “party of power, the party that those around the president create to win as many seats as they can in the Duma, insuring support for the president’s proposals.” Under Yeltsin, this party changed from one election to the next; it was called Russia’s Choice in 1993, Our Home Is Russia in 1995, and Unity in 1999. Putin chose to help foster his party of power, United Russia, to a degree Yeltsin never did. He used his greater popularity (throughout his first two terms, his popular approval ratings rarely dipped below 70 percent) and his control over patronage to ensure that United Russia won handily. Since 2003, United Russia has easily dominated the Duma, meaning the Duma has rubber-stamped everything Putin has proposed.

Putin used economic growth (based on high oil revenues) and improved security to gain much popular support through 2009 (Rose et al. 2011). But economic decline had damaged that by 2011. The parliamentary elections in December 2011 included widespread fraud, some of it captured on video and posted on the Internet. After years of relative quiescence, Russian civil society awoke; protests of tens of thousands of people demanding fairer
Police arrest a protester in December 2011 during the protests against fraud in the parliamentary election. The protests were the largest since the end of the Soviet Union, but Russia’s electoral authoritarian regime withstood the opposition and continues to rule.

Sovfoto/UGS via Getty Images

elections took place repeatedly from December 2011 to March 2012. The regime successfully resisted the protesters’ demands, however, and Putin was duly elected (again, partly via fraudulent elections) president in March 2012, though he won only 65 percent of the vote, despite having legally eliminated most serious opponents. Fearing fraudulent parliamentary polls, the opposition had united on a plan, propagated online, to vote for any party but United Russia, successfully reducing the party’s control from 70 to 53 percent of the seats in the Duma. (Gel’mans 2015, 117). Putin quickly instituted new laws that dramatically increased the fines for unauthorized demonstrations, put greater legal restrictions on NGOs, and reversed slight liberalizations President Medvedev had made to Russian federalism (see chapter 5).

Two years of severe recession, caused mainly by declining oil and other mineral prices, reduced his popularity by 2016, but his firm control of an electoral authoritarian regime left little doubt he and his party would continue to rule for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, with another Duma election looming, he re-created the mixed electoral system (see chapter 9) he had eliminated a decade earlier. A bar to small parties and a ban on regional ones guaranteed that United Russia was the only party able to field winning candidates across the nation. The electoral changes worked: United Russia gained a supermajority of the Duma—343 of 450 seats—and the ability to change the constitution at will. Fraud occurred, but was much reduced. Putin had won through more subtle forms of manipulation.

Putin handily won reelection in 2018, securing 77 percent of the vote. His most serious rival, Alexei Navalny, known for organizing nationwide anticorruption campaigns, was barred from running. Interestingly, Putin also distanced himself from United Russia, running as an independent in hopes this would increase his vote share in what was essentially a non-competitive race. The Kremlin also engaged in a massive get-out-the-vote campaign and scheduled the election for the anniversary of the annexation of the Crimea to appeal to voters who like Putin’s “tough guy” foreign policy. The opposition once again alleged and documented fraud, but Putin’s dominance seemed secure.

Civil Society

Civil society in Russia has long been considered relatively weak. While Russia has a long tradition of street protests, organized and sustained resistance has been less common. Indeed, under Soviet rule, civil society was effectively eliminated by the Communist Party’s monopoly on all public organizations. One of the reforms of the Soviet system in the late 1980s was allowing independent groups to emerge for the first time, and thousands did. This trend continued in the 1990s, but most groups had little funding and very limited support. Under Yeltsin’s weak but more or less democratic regime in the 1990s, the public sphere was relatively open, with independent media criticizing the regime and many groups emerging in civil society even though their newness and lack of funding limited their impact.
Under Putin, the government itself has tried to create civil society groups to control. Putin made clear early on that the oligarchs and other businesses would receive favorable treatment if they joined particular, regime-approved business associations, so most did. The government also created GONGOs in several sectors, as the Chinese government had a decade earlier. The best known of these was a Putin-supporting youth group called Nashi (Ours) that staged mass rallies in support of the president, complete with its own pamphlets, other propaganda, and uniforms. For many Russians, the resemblance to the Soviet-era Communist Youth League was striking.

Putin expanded the state’s use of ideology to cement popular support via creating an authoritarian public sphere. Initially he focused on increasing state strength and establishing order, which was welcomed by a weary populace at the turn of the millennium. Over time, Putin increasingly used nationalist appeals to gain support, including aligning himself with the Russian Orthodox Church and “traditional Russian values.” This turn to nationalism increased when the Russian-backed president in neighboring Ukraine was overthrown in 2014. Shortly afterward, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, a region that had historically been Russian and was populated largely by Russian speakers but was officially part of Ukraine. He then supported, with a covert military invasion. Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine who rejected the change of government in Ukraine and wanted to become part of Russia. These policies were wildly popular with the Russian people, garnering him great, though short-lived, popularity at home. Subsequent forays into international affairs, most prominently in the Syrian civil war, also gained him support as a strong nationalist building a strong state.

Along the way, he forced out virtually all independent media to eliminate widespread criticism. With television largely controlled by the state or compliant allies, many Russians have switched to the Internet for their information (Nechepurenko 2019). Indeed, Alexei Navalny, the banned presidential candidate, made his name by using online platforms including a blog, YouTube, and Twitter to publish evidence of corruption among government officials and to organize political protests. Putin was less successful at limiting the Internet, and online organizing became a key tool of organizing protests against the regime.

Early in Putin’s first term as president, the number of protests dropped significantly. Beginning in 2006, however, protests escalated again. Localized protests, focused on specific local grievances, continued through the end of the decade; the government typically made modest compromises and the protests died down (Evans 2013). In urban areas, activists tried to stage protests supporting civil rights and other pro-democracy concerns but met with very limited support. As in the past, failure to create ongoing organizations meant that protests usually petered out.

The massive protests that broke out in December 2011 in the wake of the evident fraud in the Duma election took everyone, including the regime, by surprise. Economic decline and a sense among politically aware citizens in the growing middle class that Putin’s candidacy for a third term as president in 2012 meant the choice of president was already made for them also helped awaken civil society from years of relative quiescence. Citizens took to the Internet for information, then to the streets. The regime did not respond with force. Instead, it made limited concessions, promising cleaner elections in the future and approving the election of regional governors but also restricting NGO activity, as noted above.

The government has continued its campaign to control the Internet in order to preempt criticism and limit the ability to organize. In 2018, the international NGO Freedom House ranked Russia as “Not Free” on Internet freedom. “Internet freedom declined for the sixth year in a row,” they reported, noting the many new pieces of legislation aimed at restricting anonymity and increasing censorship online introduced in the lead-up to the 2018 presidential election. In 2018, the government blocked the popular platform Telegram and also began requiring Internet companies to store users’ communications for six months and provide the Federal Security Service with access to the files (Freedom House 2018). In 2019, the latest in a long series of legislative proposals to restrict speech on the Internet passed the lower house of the Duma with Putin’s support. These would introduce jail sentences for
insulting the government or spreading "fake news" online (Nechepurenko 2019). Most of these measures have sparked demonstrations, but as yet no organization has emerged to consolidate the opposition.

Case Questions

1. Why has Putin preserved the trappings of democracy rather than creating a purely authoritarian regime? Can you use the theories of why dictators allow institutions to survive to explain Putin’s actions?

2. What do recent trends suggest for the future stability and success of Putin’s regime?

Case Study

Iran: A Theocratic, Electoral Authoritarian Regime

Iran’s formal system of government combines theocratic institutions with quasi-democratic ones, producing a theocratic version of an electoral authoritarian regime. The “democratic” elements are intended to provide some space for participation and for popular voices to be heard, but the constitution ensures that the supreme leader and the institutions he directly controls can dominate when they need to. They have used repression when necessary, clientelism, and efforts to combine theocratic and democratic claims to legitimacy to remain in power. In the 1990s, the regime allowed reformist politicians who wanted to reduce strict adherence to Islam to gain elected office, but then it effectively blocked them from enacting significant changes. By 2005, the conservative clerical leadership and the increasingly powerful Revolutionary Guard had regained control. A 2009 crisis over what was clearly a sham presidential election badly damaged the legitimacy of Iran’s quasi-democratic institutions. As in other authoritarian regimes, succession of the supreme leader looms large. While Iran has an institutionalized process of succession, it has not been tested since the revolutionary leader, Khomeini, personally appointed his heir apparent.

REGIME TYPE Theocracy and electoral authoritarian

INSTITUTIONALIZATION Theocratic institutions always more powerful than quasi-democratic ones

SUCCEDION Selection process for supreme leader amended to allow politically astute choice; president elected to four-year term

PARTIES AND ELECTIONS Parties very weak; elections regular but competition varies and controlled by supreme leader’s allies

CIVIL SOCIETY Weak but grows quickly when allowed; repressed since 2009

On June 12, 2009, Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad faced reelection. Early on, he was predicted to win easily, but he fared poorly in a televised debate, and suddenly his opponents and their supporters believed he was vulnerable. Interest in the election skyrocketed, and predictions shifted to a possible opposition victory. The morning after the election, the government announced the results with only two-thirds of the votes counted, claiming the president had won 62 percent of the vote, clearly a fraudulent outcome. The number-two candidate, reformist Mir-Hossein Mousavi, called on his supporters to protest, and within a day more than one million people marched through the streets of Tehran in the largest demonstration since the 1979 revolution. After weeks of demonstrations,
the government finally and effectively cracked down, arresting as many as five thousand protesters, putting over one hundred on televised trials on trumped-up charges, and allegedly torturing and raping some in prison. The dramatic events of 2009 were perhaps the zenith of a long battle between conservative supporters of Iran's theocratic regime who want power kept in clerical hands and reformist elements who want to strengthen the regime's quasi-democratic institutions. Citizens demanding change have put reformers into office off and on over the history of the Islamic Republic, most notably during the Khatami presidency (1997–2005). The supreme leader and his allies, however, effectively blocked reformers' policies and forced them out of office, to maintain regime control.

**Governing: Trying to Resolve the Dictator's Dilemma**

The Islamic Republic of Iran created a unique set of political institutions that are based on the theocratic principles outlined in chapter 3 but with significant participatory elements. The regime mixes appointed and elected offices to maintain central control of the leading clergy while allowing some voice to other political forces, though within strict limits. Figure 8.6 illustrates these institutions.
8.6 provides an overview of these institutions. Elected officials are allowed to pass laws and voice some public criticism, but the authority of the Shiite clergy is final. So despite its unique institutions, the Iranian government rules like many other authoritarian regimes, through a combination of repression and co-optation but with a greater-than-usual effort to gain legitimacy via Islamic ideology and electoral authoritarian institutions.

Khomeini’s contribution to Islamic political thought is the position of supreme leader, which is always filled by a respected member of the clergy. He is both legal and spiritual guide of the country. First occupied by Khomeini himself and then (since Khomeini’s death in 1989) by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the office has the power to appoint the heads of all the armed forces, the head of the judiciary, six of the twelve members of the all-important Guardian Council, and the leaders of Friday prayers at mosques. These powers mean that very little of significance can occur in Iran without at least the supreme leader’s tacit consent. An Assembly of Experts composed entirely of clergy that is popularly elected by citizens appoints the supreme leader and at least theoretically has the right to remove him, though so far it seems that the position has a lifetime term of office.

The supreme leader shares formal executive power with a directly elected president in a theocratic version of a semipresidential system. The supreme leader has broader powers than the president and is the legal head of state. The elected president appoints a cabinet, which the parliament must approve and can remove, and runs the daily affairs of government. The president is selected via a majoritarian election and can serve two four-year terms, which the last four presidents have done. The dual executive creates the possibility of tension between the supreme leader and president similar to tensions between the president and prime minister under cohabitation in semipresidential systems. When an avowed reformist was president from 1997 to 2005, he clashed regularly with the supreme leader and the institutions like the Guardian Council that limit the president’s power. The next president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), increasingly used secular nationalist rhetoric that threatened to go against the Islamist basis for the regime’s legitimacy and built up an independent base of support via appointments of supporters to key government positions. Analysts wondered if Ahmadinejad’s growing power would prove to be a real challenge to the supreme leader, but ultimately the supreme leader opposed him and his supporters lost the next parliamentary and presidential elections. The ayatollah continues to be supreme.

As in other semipresidential systems, laws must be passed by the parliament and approved by the president. The Iranian system, however, strictly limits the freedom of these elected offices. The Guardian Council must also agree to all legislation. Given that all of its members are either appointed directly by the supreme leader or nominated by his appointed judiciary, it is a bastion of clerical authority that preserves the will of the supreme leader. It also must approve all candidates for election and has repeatedly banned candidates it has deemed unacceptable for president, parliament, and local government councils. A second body, the Expediency Council, was added via constitutional amendment in 1989 to be an advisory body to the supreme leader. It has the power to resolve disputes between parliament and the Guardian Council, and its rulings are final. The supreme leader appoints all of its members, so it is an additional way for him to control elected officials.

The dual executive has control over the bureaucracy, judiciary, and armed forces. Like many authoritarian systems, Iran has more than one army. The Revolutionary Guard was formed as the armed wing of the revolution. Khomeini maintained it after the revolution as a military unit separate from the national army, which he didn’t trust. The Guard has become the most important and wealthiest military organization. The government encouraged it to fund itself by starting its own companies to help rebuild the country, and it now has a business empire estimated in the early 2000s as at least 25 percent of Iran’s economy (Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2010, 21). The government takes good care of the large and ideologically loyal Guard as well—its annual budget is larger than those of all
but a handful of government ministries. When former Guard member Ahmadinejad became president, many analysts wondered if the Guard would support him over the supreme leader, but when the supreme leader quit supporting Ahmadinejad, the Guard remained loyal to the supreme leader, one of the reasons why he was able to stifle his opponent so successfully. Since the election of President Rouhani in 2013, the Guard has clearly been a bastion of support for the supreme leader.

The supreme leader appoints the head of the judiciary, who in turn appoints all of the judges under him. The Guardian and Expediency councils perform functions somewhat akin to judicial review in democracies, but the judiciary’s role is strictly that of interpreter and enforcer of the Islamic legal code, sharia, for criminal and civil cases. Other than nominating half of the Guardian Council, the judiciary has no formal political role. The supreme leader, though, has used it repeatedly to repress political opponents; numerous political activists, journalists, and students were prosecuted on charges such as treason after the massive demonstrations in 2009.

In contrast to the absolute authority of the supreme leader, the autonomy and strength of the parliament (the majlis) are severely circumscribed, even though its formal powers look significant. In addition to passing all legislation, the majlis has approval authority over cabinet nominees and half the nominees to the Guardian Council, and it can investigate the executive’s implementation of the law. It has used these powers repeatedly, exposing corruption in the bureaucracy. The power of the appointed clerics, however, always lurks behind the actions of the majlis. When the clerics disapprove of significant legislation, they don’t hesitate to use their power to veto it via the Guardian Council and rewrite it in the Expediency Council. When the reformists gained control of the majlis in 2000, the Guardian Council vetoed virtually all of their significant reform legislation.

The Iranian regime, like all authoritarian regimes, also uses co-optation to maintain its control. The bureaucracy has expanded by as much as 50 percent since the revolution. Because of Iran’s massive oil revenue, government spending is a majority of the country’s economy. This gives the top leadership significant patronage opportunities. Government and quasi-governmental foundations (called bonyads) have also become key venues through which the nation’s oil wealth is shared with regime supporters. The foundations often receive government funding, and some engage in commercial activity as well. One of the largest, the Imam Charity Committee, receives private donations in addition to the fourth-largest share of the government’s annual budget. It is controlled by conservative supporters of the clergy, who use it to mobilize poor voters in favor of conservative candidates. The Revolutionary Guard also controls one of the largest bonyads, which provides income support to millions of people, giving the Guard its own independent basis for patronage. Some of these foundations and their leaders engage in outright corruption as well, stealing oil revenues and accepting bribes in return for access to key officials.

The importance of the supreme leader and his de facto life term leaves Iran with one of the classic problems of authoritarian rule: succession. Khomeini’s popularity and power were based not only on the traditional legitimacy he enjoyed as a grand ayatollah, one of a handful of the highest religious authorities in Shiite Islam but also on his charismatic legitimacy as the leader of the revolution. Khomeini and other leaders did not believe that any of the other grand ayatollahs could fully replace him as the supreme leader, so to avert
Iranian twins dressed in the teal headscarves that are a symbol of the reform movement pass out leaflets during the 2016 election. President Hassan Rouhani’s moderate coalition won majority control of parliament, but only after the Guardian Council had refused to allow at least 1,500 reformist candidates to enter the race. Whether the moderates’ control of parliament would allow them to change the government’s policies, though, remained to be seen, in that the Guardian Council can veto any legislation it finds is “against the revolution.”

Photo by Scott Peterson/Getty Images

a potential crisis, a constitutional amendment eliminated the requirement that the supreme leader come from only among their ranks. This allowed the regime to select then-president Ali Khamenei as the new supreme leader. He was only a midlevel cleric and, in fact, was raised overnight to the rank of ayatollah (still below grand ayatollah) in an effort to give him greater religious authority. Khomeini and his advisers chose someone who understood politics rather than an icon of religious authority. The other grand ayatollahs did not fight Khamenei’s ascendance because they had become increasingly disillusioned with the regime: while initially in favor of the revolution, most had taken an increasingly traditionalist position during the 1980s, divorcing themselves from active politics. Still, lack of clerical support raised questions about Khamanei’s legitimacy as supreme leader, which was one of the factors that led him to strengthen the power of the Revolutionary Guard, a military force loyal to him. While his position is secure, his own succession remains unclear.

Parties and Elections

Iran’s regime has allowed limited but competitive elections since it began, though the degree of competition has varied. Majlis elections are majoritarian in single-member districts. They are held every four years, and while none has been truly free and fair, the Guardian Council at times has allowed significant competition. The council is pivotal to the process because of its power to ban candidates from running, a power it has used increasingly to thwart reform candidates. In the 1997 presidential election, Mohammad Khatami, a reformist cleric, won a sweeping victory that many observers saw as the start of a major liberalization of the political system. Until 2000, however, conservatives in parliament were numerous enough to block major reforms. In the 2000 majlis election, the Guardian Council did not prevent reformist candidates from running because of Khatami’s popularity, and reformists won 80 percent of the vote. The new majlis passed reforms involving greater freedoms of
expression, women’s rights, human rights in general, and market-oriented economic policies. The Guardian Council, however, vetoed many of these, arguing that they violated sharia. By the 2004 _majlis_ election, the Guardian Council once again felt it was safe to ban thousands of reformist candidates. Conservatives won the election, but turnout dropped from nearly 70 percent to 50 percent. Since then, the council has repeatedly banned reformist candidates, leading the major reformist party to boycott the 2012 _majlis_ election altogether.

The 2013 presidential election once again showed the power of the Guardian Council to enforce the interests of the supreme leader. Forty candidates put their names forward, but the council approved only eight, six of whom were conservative supporters of the clerical leadership. Both retiring President Ahmadinejad’s preferred candidate and the leading reformist candidate, former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, were banned. As the campaign developed, Rafsanjani endorsed Hassan Rouhani as the closest thing to a true reformist candidate, and he won with just over 50 percent of the vote. The election showed both the continuing popular demand for change and the clerical leadership’s ability to limit reformers’ efforts.

Since coming to office, President Rouhani has had limited success, especially on domestic policy. He supported the successful nuclear accord with the United States that many hardliners opposed, which resulted in a partial lifting of economic sanctions. The accord was subsequently reversed by the United States under President Donald Trump. Rouhani’s initial efforts at opening up the economy to outside influences more fully were resisted by opponents in parliament and the Revolutionary Guard, whose economic influence remains huge. Rouhani’s moderate reformist coalition won majority control of the _majlis_ in 2016, though the Guardian Council prevented hundreds of more radical reformist candidates from running for office. After a grueling campaign in which conservatives coalesced and fought hard against him, including alleging that he and members of his government engaged in corruption, Rouhani tacked more to the reformist side and won reelection in 2017 with 57 percent of the vote, with over 70 percent of Iran’s voters participating.

Political parties are weak institutions in contemporary Iran, but given the severe restrictions on the power of elective offices, this is understandable. The prerevolutionary regime of the shah was modernizing authoritarian and rarely allowed significant participation, so the country has no major history of political parties. Despite the Islamic constitution’s guarantee of a right to form parties, Khomeini banned them in 1987, claiming they produced unnecessary divisions. Reformist president Khatami successfully legalized parties again in 1998, which helped make the 2000 _majlis_ election the most open and competitive ever. Khatami’s reformist supporters coalesced into a party called the Khorad Front that won the huge victory that year. Parties continue to exist but as loose coalitions around individual leaders, not as enduring organizations with which citizens identify. In spite of this weakness, the government banned the two leading reformist parties after the 2009 election.

In the absence of stronger parties, ideological factions are central to understanding Iranian political shifts over time. Iranian political scientist Payam Mohseni (2016) delineated two key factional dimensions: theocracy versus republicanism and left versus right. The latter is the familiar division between those who favor economic policies emphasizing greater market forces versus those who favor a greater role for the state (see chapter 10). The theocratic versus republican division is unique to Iran; it distinguishes those who believe in the nearly absolute power of the supreme leader and legitimacy coming solely from Allah versus those who see legitimacy as coming from the populace via the regime’s democratic elements. Mohseni analyzed each major political era in Iran’s turbulent history as a result of an alliance between two of these factions. The reformists who supported President Khatami in the 1990s, for instance, were an alliance among republicans, both left and right, while President Ahmadinejad, a key leader of the theocratic left, ruled in an alliance with the theocratic right. Both coalitions ultimately divided along traditional left–right divisions over economic policies, such as using more oil money to fund social programs for the poor. Rouhani, who began as a moderate with reformist support, attracted an increasing number
of conservatives, whom Mohseni calls "modern theocrats" to his "anti-extremist" alliance. Mohseni argues that the 2017 election shows conservative clerics' determination to resist the formation of a consensus among moderate, reformist, and conservative elites who embrace a less stringent Islamist ideology and want to integrate Iran into the global system. He foresees a polarization of Iranian politics as conservative hardliners define clearer ideological boundaries to preserve their base (Mohseni 2017).

Civil Society

Like political parties, civil society is not particularly strong in Iran, but the period of reformist ascendance—1997 to 2004—saw an explosion of civil society activity when government restrictions were temporarily relaxed. The Islamic theocratic regime defines civil society as functioning within the limits imposed by its version of Islamist thought. This created an authoritarian public sphere, in which political speech and action are judged as comporting to and supporting the Islamic revolution or not. A key element of the reformist movement that arose in the mid-to late 1990s was not only a secular critique of this (though that certainly existed as well) but an Islamist modernist movement that argued for a more open and tolerant interpretation of Islam, one that would allow more open discussion and action. Reformist president Khatami used this idea to justify allowing newspapers and NGOs to form and operate (Fadaee 2012).

Of particular note were media, women's, and student groups. Whenever the government has allowed it, the media have expanded rapidly. Leading up to the 2000 majlis election, many newspapers emerged, and an exceptionally open political debate occurred. Since that time, religious authorities have again repressed newspapers, closing them down for criticizing the government too harshly and drastically reducing public debate. Civil society groups once again emerged in the 2009 protests until they met with overwhelming repression. Since 2009, numerous political activists and journalists have been arrested and jailed, and key journalistic and legal associations were banned. The government created a new "cyberpolice force" to monitor the Internet and disrupt bloggers and social media sites critical of the regime, and it officially banned Facebook and Instagram. These restrictions, however, have had modest effects; forty-five million Iranians have Facebook accounts, including, ironically, Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Rouhani (Milani 2015, 58). Antigovernment protests in January 2018 led authorities to slow down Internet connections, block servers outside Iran, and block Instagram and Telegram. After temporarily lifting both blocks, Telegram was declared a security threat and was permanently blocked in April 2018. The Iranian state does not appear to have the strength to restrict the Internet as effectively as the Chinese state, but it continues to exert control and block access, leading Freedom House to classify it as not free with a score only slightly better than China's (Freedom House 2018).

Women have become an important organized force over the last decade. Ironically, in terms of women's position in society, the Islamic regime may well have been more "modernizing" than the earlier modernizing authoritarian regime of the shah. Women constitute 62 percent of university students, and a birth control policy has lowered childbearing and population growth rates dramatically (see chapter 4). Conservative clergy have resisted changes to laws regarding divorce, clothing, and other issues associated with religious observance, but they have allowed significant socioeconomic changes in women's lives. These changes have fostered the growth of women's organizations calling for even further change. All major politicians now court the women's vote during elections.

The Green Movement that emerged in response to the fraudulent 2009 election showed both the strength and weakness of Iran's incipient civil society. It brought at least a million people onto the streets of Tehran and reached beyond its middle-class base, but it did not have much effect in the countryside. Though initiated in response to an appeal from the losing candidate, it had no clear formal organization. A decentralized organizing system
Iran and the Middle East

In spite of its reputation as a “pariah state” in much of the West, Iran was about average in its region in terms of the level of freedom and social well-being enjoyed by its population, at least until the controversial 2009 election and its aftermath moved the country in a less democratic direction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>IRAN</th>
<th>MIDDLE EAST/NORTH AFRICA AVERAGE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom House civil liberties score</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom House political rights score</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy Index 2008</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>3.54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy Index 2015</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>3.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Development Index 2015</td>
<td>0.798</td>
<td>0.699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate</td>
<td>86.8%</td>
<td>89.85%</td>
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Using Twitter and Facebook became the main means of communication, aided by public statements and occasional public appearances by reformist leaders. Protests continued for weeks and showed the youthful participants that change was possible, but the government successfully repressed them in spite of widespread international condemnation. Moussavi, the leading reformer, called for demonstrations again in February 2011 in support of the Arab Spring movements in Egypt and Tunisia. Tens of thousands of Iranians turned out, but the government responded with force, disbanding the demonstrations and arresting its leaders once again, in spite of the fact that the regime itself was in favor of the Arab Spring.

Seven years after the huge demonstrations and in spite of the partial victory in the 2013 presidential election and 2016 parliamentary election, the reform movement is severely limited. Reformers have supported the more moderate forces around President Rouhani, but those demanding more fundamental changes in the regime have been effectively silenced. A major response, though, has been to initiate underground activity. Numerous underground media and Internet sites exist. A banned filmmaker managed to produce a film and send it to European competitions, starring a human rights advocate playing herself, who was also banned from any political activity. And as noted above, millions of people have Facebook and Instagram accounts even though both are banned. Without the ability to openly engage with the regime, civil society organizations and activists have moved underground and online (Milani 2015).

Given the weak formal institutions of participation and the government’s repeated repression of them, it is not surprising that clientelism is a crucial form of political activity as well as a key way to gain support for the government. Clientelist factions long predate the Islamic regime in Iran, and the regime has done little to eliminate them. Indeed, many scholars argue that such factions are essential to the regime’s continued rule. The ruling
elite consists of numerous patrons in key government or bonyad positions, informally leading large numbers of clients who provide them with political support. These factions are crucial venues through which political participation occurs. Indeed, President Khatami’s reforms in the late 1990s and early 2000s were aimed in part at strengthening civil society to weaken the networks that clerics and their supporters use as tools of co-optation. Under President Ahmadinejad, factions and networks of former Revolutionary Guards expanded their power and position dramatically. They are now among the strongest opponents to President Rouhani’s reform agenda.

Case Questions

1. Recent trends have suggested that the quasi-democratic elements of Iran’s governing institutions are relatively weak. Nonetheless, how might they help the top Iranian leadership overcome the dictator’s dilemma that all authoritarian regimes face?

2. What does Iran’s history suggest about the relative importance of repression, co-optation, and legitimacy for the survival of authoritarian regimes?

3. Can the theories that explain the durability of electoral authoritarian regimes be applied to Iran’s theocratic regime? How much do they help us explain Iran?

Conclusion

By the dawn of the new millennium, it was clear that while democracy had expanded, authoritarianism was not about to disappear entirely. Since the end of the Cold War, electoral authoritarian rule has expanded, and more “closed” authoritarian rule that allows no formal opposition has been on the wane (with China clearly being the world’s biggest exception to the trend). The differences between fully authoritarian and electoral authoritarian rule, though, aren’t as great as they might at first appear. Understanding the opaque political dynamics of authoritarian and electoral authoritarian regimes will continue to be a concern for comparative politics for the foreseeable future.

On the face of it, dictators seem to control virtually everything in authoritarian regimes. The executive would seem to be all-powerful. As we’ve seen, though, this is often not the case, which makes figuring out who rules rather difficult. The key question is not just what formal institutions exist but how institutionalized they are. Ultimately, in authoritarian regimes, the supreme leader or a small coterie of leaders (such as a politburo) has final authority to decide as they will. Much of the internal politics and institutionalization of authoritarian rule is determined by the relationships between the supreme leader, on one hand, and the rest of the top elite, on the other.

Ruling by fiat and repression alone is both difficult and expensive. Holding a gun to every citizen’s head, as well as maintaining the loyalty of those holding the guns, is not easy. All regimes, therefore, seek to gain some sort of legitimacy or at least to buy support via co-optation. A means to achieve both legitimacy and support is to limit the supreme leader’s power in order to give others, especially key elites, some influence. Institutionalized and therefore predictable governing and limited participatory institutions can accomplish this. Examining those institutions and how strong they are can thus be a key means to understanding who really rules and how much influence they have. Even in the most personalist regimes with
little institutionalization, patron–client relationships are important for co-opting opposition. More powerful individuals control more patronage, and on the other side, some clients are more powerful and thus more likely to have their requests attended to than others. Comparativists attempt the difficult task of understanding these informal networks and relationships to determine who rules in countries where institutions matter little.

Comparativists have long catalogued authoritarian regimes into various subtypes. It’s clear, however, that certain commonalities exist in all authoritarian regimes. For instance, all dictators face the dictator’s dilemma, though they attempt to solve it in different ways. All dictators also rule through some combination of repression, co-optation, and attempts at legitimation, but again in differing ways and amounts. Some of this variation is systematic across subtypes: different subtypes display consistent and distinct behavior. One-party and of course electoral authoritarian regimes provide opportunities for greater participation via formal institutions. Military regimes are less likely to do so, as political participation and open dissent are foreign to professional military culture. Following the logic of the dictator’s dilemma, regimes that allow less participation are likely to require more repression and co-optation. Military regimes seem likely to use repression, given their inherent control of force. Personalist regimes that have weak institutions across the board focus mostly on co-optation via patronage, using repression as well but often in less institutionalized and therefore less effective ways. Such a personalist regime might have, for example, multiple and competing military agencies that are informally loyal to individual leaders rather than to the regime as a whole. The splits within the military in response to the 2011 uprising in Libya show the possible effects of this aspect of personalist rule. Personalist regimes that are able to establish institutions, usually because of a rough balance of power between the supreme ruler and other elites, are more likely to avoid Libya’s fate.

The earliest theoretical approaches to understanding authoritarian regimes focused mainly on individual leaders or national cultures. Individual leaders are clearly crucial in such regimes, so scholars used psychological theories to understand their personal influences and motivations. More recently, scholars have used rational choice or historical-institutionalist models to understand authoritarian regimes. Dictators face a common set of governing problems. To overcome these, they engage in a combination of repression, co-optation, and legitimation. This behavioral pattern, rational choice theorists argue, is determined by the dictators’ and their opponents’ or allies’ rational responses to their conditions, the most important of which are the relative strengths of the actors and the resources at their disposal. As with many arguments in comparative politics, institutionalist theories are at the forefront of the debate today but have not definitively proven their case. We turn next to another set of difficult questions about regimes: why and how they change from one type to another via military coup, revolution, or democratization.


**RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY**


**WEB RESOURCES**

Quality of Government Institute, University of Gothenburg, the QoG Data

(http://www.qog.pol.gu.se/data)

World Bank, Database of Political Institutions

(http://go.worldbank.org/2EAGGLRZ40)

World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index

(http://www.worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index)

World Values Survey

(http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)