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The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes

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Why do some autocracies remain stable while others collapse? This article presents a theoretical framework that seeks to explain the longevity of autocracies by referring to three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation. These three causal factors are derived by distilling and synthesizing the main arguments of classic and more recent research efforts. Particular emphasis is paid to re-incorporate legitimation in the explanation of stable autocracies. The article conceptualizes the three pillars and discusses methods of concrete measurement. It then moves on to explain the stabilization process. How do these pillars develop their stabilizing effect? It is argued that reinforcement processes take place both within and between the pillars. They take the form of exogenous reinforcement, self-reinforcement, and reciprocal reinforcement. To illustrate the inner logic of these processes, I draw on empirical examples. I also state what we would need to observe empirically and how we can approach the three pillars methodically. A theoretical framework of this nature has two advantages: it is able to take the complexity of autocratic regimes into account while remaining parsimonious enough to be applicable to all autocratic regimes, irrespective of their subtype; and it integrates a static view to explain stability, with the emphasis on the underlying stabilization mechanisms and facilitates within-case and cross-case comparisons.

Keywords: autocracy; stability; legitimation; repression; co-optation

What makes autocracies endure?

In 1996, in a widely cited article, Adam Przeworski and his colleagues asked “what makes democracies endure?” They came to the conclusion that it was mainly economic performance and the institutional choice of parliamentarism that contributes decisively to the longevity of democracies.¹ Their article stands in a long tradition, and while the research on democracy and democratization has produced an abundance of theories and empirical results, the research on autocratic political regimes as the “counterpart” to democracies has not moved beyond the classics of the 1960s and 1970s.² This changed as the “third wave of democratization” ebbed away and

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the widespread optimism both in politics and political science was replaced by a more sobering assessment. Stable autocracies came more and more to the forefront of scholarly attention. New and innovative answers to long-standing problems have been recently proposed to shed light on the logics of autocracies.³ This article is located within this lively ongoing debate and asks what, in turn, makes autocracies endure?

The main aim is to propose a theoretical framework for the analysis of stable autocratic regimes.⁴ It tries to synthesize the main arguments that have been brought forward in both the classics in autocracy research and in more recent studies regarding *why* many autocracies have remained stable. It will be argued that the *stability* of all autocracies – irrespective of their subtype – can be explained with reference to what might be aptly called the three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation.⁵

These three pillars are not there from the outset, but need to develop over time. *How* do they get built, that is how can we make sense theoretically of the *stabilization* process? I argue that reinforcement processes take place both within and between the pillars. These processes can take different forms: an exogenous reinforcement process that is propelled by the available power and material resources of the ruling regime; an endogenous self-reinforcement process that triggers path-dependency; and, lastly, a reciprocal reinforcement process that leads to a complementarity advantage between the pillars. I suggest that these three processes should be studied closely for explaining the *stabilization* of autocratic regimes.

A theoretical framework of this kind has, in my view, two advantages. First, it is capable of taking the complexity of autocracies into account while remaining parsimonious enough to be applicable to all autocratic regimes. Second, it integrates a static view to explain stability with a more dynamic perspective to look closely at the stabilization processes and, as a result, facilitates both within-case and cross-case comparisons.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: the second section conducts a review of the literature to identify the three main pillars. The third section engages in concept-building and operationalizes their specifications in more detail. Against this backdrop, I theorize in the fourth section how these three pillars come into being, before drawing a conclusion in the final section.

What does the literature say?

Why are legitimation, repression, and co-optation key to the stability of autocracies? To answer this, a review of the literature will lay open different strands of explanatory schemes that can be integrated within one comprehensive and coherent framework. Broadly speaking, three research waves can be identified: the totalitarianism paradigm until the mid-1960s that highlighted ideology and terror; the rise of authoritarianism until the 1980s that placed more emphasis on socio-economic factors; and, starting with Geddes' seminal article in 1999, a renaissance of autocracy research that centred mostly on strategic repression and co-optation.

First wave, 1930s–1960s: the totalitarianism paradigm

Starting with early works in the 1930s,⁶ the use of the concept of totalitarianism to characterize a new social phenomenon became widespread. The benchmark study – at least within political science – is still the study conducted by Friedrich and Brzezinski.⁷ In the 1950s, they proposed their famous “six-point catalogue” for identifying totalitarian regimes.⁸ The creation of a “new man” was stipulated by an all-encompassing ideology with strong chiliastic and utopian fervour and was implemented by the use of terror, by propaganda measures and a strong party.⁹ While Friedrich and Brzezinski’s argument is structuralist in character, Hannah Arendt’s work was a socio-philosophical attempt to understand the essence of totalitarianism.¹⁰ In her work, she highlighted what she identified as the two main features of totalitarian *Herrschaft*: ideology and terror. She saw totalitarianism, with its attempt to atomize society, as the radical negation of what she understood as the political. In a similar vein, a strong emphasis on ideology and terror was also underlined in a third approach. Totalitarian movements have been compared to political religion in order to explain their “*tremendum et fascinosum*”.¹¹

However, in the 1960s, the totalitarianism paradigm faced mounting critique. In addition to criticizing its inherent statism, Barber also complained about the fuzzy conceptual foundations of the term.¹² Given the scarcity of empirical cases, this led to a situation in which totalitarianism was increasingly edged out by the concept of authoritarianism.

Second wave, 1960s–1980s: the rise of authoritarianism

The concept of authoritarianism had more modest beginnings. Juan Linz claimed in 1964 that Francoist Spain should not be studied through the lenses of totalitarianism, but that authoritarianism constituted a new and distinct phenomenon.¹³ The rise of authoritarianism as a distinct regime type began, with O’Donnell’s study on “bureaucratic authoritarianism” as the most prominent one.¹⁴ In brief, O’Donnell argued that, due to the fact that Argentina and Brazil reached limits in their import substitution strategy, bureaucratic elites from the military and business that became increasingly frustrated with the political and economic circumstances emerged. In response to the perceived crisis, they formed a coup coalition that finally established an authoritarian regime and sought economic progress and state order. Although his explanations encountered difficulties in travelling to other Latin American countries, he emphasized a point that had previously been overshadowed: the socio-economic dimension functioned both as a driver for the emergence and the maintenance of authoritarian regimes.¹⁵ I will take up this explanatory factor later in the discussion about “specific support”.¹⁶

Two other trends are worth considering within this wave: a proliferation of subtypes and a “regionalization” of explanations.¹⁷ Especially in Latin America and Southeast Asia, military regimes emerged in the 1960s and 1970s that were characterized by the persistent political role of the military and that acted behind

a quasi-civilian façade. Simultaneously, sub-Saharan Africa experienced an increase in one-party regimes, while the autocracies in many Arab countries began to build their stability on neo-patrimonial rule and a “social contract” between the rulers and the ruled.¹⁸

What all these explanations have in common is that they varied greatly from the totalitarianism paradigm and searched for more nuanced and tailored explanations for new (regional) phenomena. The quintessence was that autocrats cannot rely solely on ideology and terror, but also need to deliver improved socio-economic performances, sometimes focused in informal reward policies.

Third wave: a renaissance in studies of autocracies

The third wave of autocracy research started after a time lag. It was not until the seminal article by Barbara Geddes in 1999 that scholarly attention returned to questions surrounding autocracies.¹⁹ Most prominently, neo-institutionalist approaches have recently entered the research on autocracies and have highlighted the stabilizing effect of institutions.²⁰ The role of political parties, legislatures, and elections as co-optation mechanisms has been of particular importance. In older research, elections and legislatures were seen as mere window dressing and parties were mainly reduced to entities that “provide a following for the dictator”.²¹ Gandhi and Przeworski go beyond this reasoning and argue that autocratic rulers do make systematic use of these seemingly democratic institutions to prolong their rule.²² In particular, it has been demonstrated that one-party regimes are more robust than other regimes. Parties seem to have a stabilizing effect on autocratic rule, as they can settle and mediate intra-elite conflicts.²³ Also, elections serve as a tool for co-optation. They provide information for the national leaders regarding the loyalty and competence of regional and local incumbents.²⁴

In contrast to the repressive abuse in totalitarian regimes, Acemoglu and Robinson compellingly point out that strategic and, in game-theoretic language, “optimal” degrees of repression play a particularly decisive role in the longevity of autocratic regimes.²⁵ In their rational choice approach, a second topic is of special interest: intra-elite cohesion. The underlying premise here is that all autocratic regimes have to share power in an insecure environment, in which any defection must be avoided by the (threat of the) use of force. The latent danger of intra-elite splits must be tackled. Co-opting institutions are crucial here, as they alleviate moral hazard problems.²⁶

To conclude, while the totalitarianism paradigm especially emphasized the use of terror and the role of political ideologies, subsequent studies have differed in their research focus. Socio-economic conditions, as well as more informal characteristics of authoritarian rule, have come to the forefront and have largely dominated the discourse. In the last decade, the stabilizing effect that strategic repression and formal institutions like elections, legislatures, and parties have in shoring up an intra-elite cohesion have been analysed more rigorously. Table 1 provides an overview.

Table 1. Waves of autocracy research.

	Totalitarian paradigm (1940s–1970s)	Rise of authoritarianism (1970s–1980s)	Renaissance of autocracy studies (end 1990s–today)
Research strands	Political-structural (Friedrich/Brzezinski, Schapiro) Socio-philosophical (Arendt) Political religion (Aron, Voegelin, later: Maier, Gentile)	“Bureaucratic authoritarianism” (O’Donnell, Collier) Military politics (Finer, Nordlinger) Informal politics (Eisenstadt)	Institutionalist approaches (Brownlee, Gandhi, Magaloni) Actor-centred approaches (Wintrobe, Svolik, Acemoglu, and Robinson)
Main research focus	Ideographic case studies (Nazi-Germany, Fascist Italy, SU, Maoist China)	Case studies, small- <i>N</i> comparisons (Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa)	Methodical pluralism (worldwide)
Main explanatory factors	Ideology and terror	Socio-economic conditions and informal politics	Co-optation and strategic repression

In order to synthesize these different strands in one coherent analytical framework, I propose the three pillars of legitimation, repression, and co-optation. I argue that they are able to thwart the danger of regime breakdown that could stem from three sources: from the ordinary citizens whose non-compliance usually takes the form of popular uprisings and rebellions; from oppositional actors that organize resistance; and lastly from intra-elite splits in which strategically important elites deviate from the ruling elite's course.²⁷ The conceptualization, operationalization, and methods of concrete measurement are dealt with in the following section.

The concepts: legitimation, repression, and co-optation

Reincorporating legitimation in the study of autocracies

Recent research efforts have gradually lost sight of the legitimation dimension. As shown above, legitimation was at the core of classic studies. Closely linked to the demise of the totalitarianism paradigm, it currently plays only a secondary role. Contemporary critiques come from three sides: normative, substantive, and methodical. Normatively, it is argued that a "legitimate autocracy" constitutes nothing more than an oxymoron. Substantively, it is claimed that legitimation simply does not matter for the stability of autocracies, as such regimes do not need to rely on people's support.²⁸ And lastly, from a more pragmatic viewpoint, the methodical challenges in measuring legitimation in autocratic settings remain unsolved.

These are good reasons. However, I argue that we miss an important causal factor when we bracket out legitimation. Instead, I make the case for re-incorporating it into the explanation of stable autocracies. Taking up the aforementioned critique, legitimation will be defined here as the process of gaining support which is based on an empirical, Weberian tradition of "legitimacy belief".²⁹ It is then free from normative connotations and therefore does not run counter to the oxymoron criticism. This was exactly Weber's aim. He attempted to classify political rule without reference to normative judgments that are supposed to be the "right" rule. Legitimation seeks to guarantee active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population.

The substantial critique puts the relevance of legitimation for maintaining stability into question. However, Rousseau's famous dictum that even the strongest needs to transform strength into right, as he would be never strong enough to be always the master, applies to the autocratic context as well. I explicitly start from the assumption that behind every political order there must be a "legitimacy idea".³⁰ Today's autocracies cannot rely (at least in the long term) entirely on their abuse of power in a strictly hierarchical, pyramid-shaped political order as the unconstrained tyrants of the past – from whom all power was derived – might have done. Wittfogel's old idea of an "oriental despotism", in which the elite can regulate the access to water and can so rule unboundedly in a "hydraulic society", does not seem to be suitable for today's autocracies.³¹ Instead, they are characterized by many more interdependencies between the ruler and the ruled.

Even now, only anecdotal evidence is available as to why legitimation matters. A more solid theoretical basis is needed. For illustrative purposes it might suffice here to refer to the basic logic in different empirical cases. Regime maintenance in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) has, for example, been explained by a mixture of charismatic and rational legitimacy beliefs. Despite all mobilization efforts, this legitimacy belief was ironically held by an emergent apolitical middle class, whose reference points were the family or colleagues from work, instead of focusing on "high politics". Yet when the regime came under mounting pressure in the 1970s to give up its utopian promises and focus more closely on performance criteria, it failed to "deliver". The GDR's weak spot was the citizens' disenchantment and perception of a growing discrepancy between the official ideological claims and the social reality that finally led to its breakdown.³² A similar pattern can be seen contemporaneously in the so-called "Arab Spring". For a long time, these populist authoritarian states were said to rely on a "social contract": a reciprocal relationship that guaranteed political acquiescence in return for relatively acceptable economic performances.³³ Due to growing disillusionment, the ruled people in Tunisia and Egypt withdrew from this "social contract" and protested. From Mexico we know, following Magaloni's study, that the monopolist Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) gained public support in times of economic growth and that Mexicans "voted for autocracy" for decades; it was only the younger generation, who had not experienced the times of economic stability, which finally dumped the PRI from office in 2000.³⁴ Alternatively, take the case of the People's Republic of China, in which the ruling Communist Party (CP) was very successful in (re)gaining public legitimacy after the Tiananmen protests in 1989 by using a mixture of economic performance, nationalism, and ideology.³⁵ These exemplary empirical cases do not, however, provide systematic evidence; a broader comparative study of legitimation in autocracies is still pending. But these cases illustrate the crucial importance for autocratic regimes to build a strong legitimizing basis.

The examples also suggest that autocratic regimes are more performance-dependent than is often assumed. For a long time, the legitimation dimension has been equated with "ideocracies" like Cuba or North Korea and "theocracies" like Iran.³⁶ The underlying idea was that massive indoctrination turns citizens into "true believers". However, it seems that autocratic regimes cannot maintain a utopian ideology and shield the people from external influences over a longer period. The indoctrination mechanism reaches its limits. Even North Korea, globally the most reclusive state, has growing problems maintaining its informational monopoly and needs to legitimate its rule more strongly with reference to its nuclear ambitions.³⁷ Such as in the case of the GDR, ideocracies arrive sooner or later at a state in which they need to deliver. This can turn out to be the Trojan horse for the autocratic elite and makes them more vulnerable to people's assessments.³⁸ Therefore, we should go beyond the reasoning of the intensity of ideological indoctrination and include performance and output legitimation as a different legitimation source in our studies.³⁹ I propose that the old Eastonian

distinction between “diffuse” and “specific support” captures the concept of legitimation most appropriately.

“Specific support” can be defined as the “quid pro quo for the fulfilment of demands”,⁴⁰ and particularly includes the performance orientation. As has been emphasized in the second wave of autocracy research, autocracies have to address popular demands for socio-economic development and physical security. Besides economic conditions, specific support can also stem from the state’s ability to maintain internal order and social security. “Diffuse support” refers to what the regime “actually is or represents”.⁴¹ In contrast to specific support, it is more general and long-term-oriented. Diffuse support of this nature can stem from both the political ideologies that have been the main focus in classic totalitarian research, and also from religious, nationalistic, or traditional claims, from the charisma of autocratic leaders as well as from external threats that lead to domestic rally-around-the-flag effects.⁴²

One challenge remains. Even if we agree to have good reasons to reincorporate legitimation in the study of autocracies, how can we measure it? For specific support, we can assume, in line with the conceptual discussion that the regime needs to deliver. The better it performs economically, socially, and in terms of public order, the more legitimate it is in the eyes of the ruled. The rulers fulfil the social contract. Adequate performance indicators are existent and can also be aggregated to specific indices.⁴³

The different World Bank Development Indicators, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates, inflation rates, growth of energy consumption/capita, but also vehicles per capita or telephones and televisions per capita, are good indicators for the economic performance of the regime. The growth or decline in social, health, and educational expenditures, the GINI index for social inequality, the school enrolment per capita and the literacy rate, the physicians per capita, or the overall Human Development Index (HDI) are adequate indicators that can be used for measuring specific support.⁴⁴ To what extent the promise to guarantee internal security and public order has been kept can be measured by proxy-indicators like the number of riots, strikes, guerrilla warfare, or the country’s crime rate.⁴⁵

Diffuse legitimation is without doubt a harder nut to crack.⁴⁶ Measuring legitimation in democracies routinely relies on survey data about people’s attitudes. For autocracies, this kind of data is either unreliable, as it faces the problem of preference falsification, or simply does not exist. How can we evaluate how successful an ideology has been? Three routes to come closer to the degree of diffuse support can be proposed. First, the number and intensity of public protests can be taken as a proxy-indicator for societal discontent. This route would not derive its informative value from people’s attitude, but more from its empirically observable behaviour.⁴⁷ The higher the number of protests, the less a regime is legitimized. However, two problems arise: on the one hand, protest data just measures the absence of legitimation and is therefore “one-sided”; on the other hand, public protests depend on the population’s ability to protest in the first place, that is the weakening of repression. Therefore, repression needs to be discounted. A second route for approximating a

legitimation measure can be via qualitative assessments of country experts or assessments in secondary literature, which are both labour-intensive tasks. Third, official legitimacy claims by the ruling elite can be taken more seriously and can be classified by using content analysis techniques. Under the premise that the ruling elite must also keep its ideological promises in autocratic settings, a perceived gap between the promises and the social reality erodes the legitimation basis for the autocratic elite.

Repression as the backbone of autocracies

Repression is undoubtedly one of the backbones of autocracies and is sometimes even referred to as a defining feature of autocracies. Yet repression alone cannot account for the longevity of autocracies. Repression is too costly a way to maintain stability in the long run; as the pointed saying attributed to Talleyrand goes, you can do anything with bayonets except sit on them. Following Davenport, repression can be defined as the “actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities”.⁴⁸ Its main function lies in channelling public demands vis-à-vis the political system in a way that these demands do not endanger the autocratic regime.

In operationalizing the concept, I will make use of the instructive distinction by Levitsky and Way between “high” and “low intensity” repression.⁴⁹ In their work they distinguish repression according to the targeted people or institution and the form of violence used. Against this backdrop, high intensity coercion can be defined as visible acts that are targeted either at well-known individuals like opposition leaders, at a larger number of people, or at major oppositional organizations. Concrete measures include the (violent) repression of mass demonstrations, (violent) campaigns against parties, and the attempted assassination or imprisonment of opposition leaders. Lower intensity coercion would then aim at groups of minor importance, is less visible, and often takes more subtle forms. Concrete measures can be the use of (formal and informal) surveillance apparatus, low intensity physical harassment and intimidation, and also non-physical forms such as the denial of certain job and education opportunities as well as the curtailment of political rights like the freedom of assembly. The measurement of repression is straightforward as data is available. The distinction by Freedom House (FH) between “political rights” and “civil liberties” mirror to some extent the distinction between harder and softer forms of repression. The Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Dataset (CIRI) is, however, arguably more suitable, as it makes the composition of its indices transparent and so allows for the construction of separate indices. CIRI’s distinction between its “New Empowerment Index” and the “Physical Rights Index” captures low and high intensity repression correspondingly. A third alternative database would be the Political Terror Scale (PTS) project, which bases its assessments on the yearly reports by Amnesty International and the US State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.⁵⁰

The third pillar: co-optation

I define co-optation as the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite. In Bueno de Mesquita's terms, members of the "selectorate" need to be bound to the "winning coalition".⁵¹ Co-optation needs to be exerted so that the actor is "persuaded not to exercise his power to obstruct" and instead to use the resources in line with the ruling elite's demands.⁵² The "players" in this "autocratic subgame" are on the intra-elite level. Military and business elites of strategic importance need to be co-opted.⁵³ The function of co-optation can be characterized as inclusionary. It works as a transmission belt to ensure both the intra-elite cohesion and the steering capacity of the political elite. The ability of the political elite to maintain the balance between competing subordinate actors and to avoid a situation in which one actor grows too strong by simultaneously tying all relevant actors to the regime is crucial for the stability of autocracies.

As discussed above, Gandhi and Przeworski make a strong case for co-optation via formal channels.⁵⁴ Prima facie democratic institutions like parliaments, parties, or elections have vital functions for the co-optation of strategic elites from business or military ranks. There are, however, also informal ways of binding actors to the regime. In this regard, (neo) patrimonialism was already seen in the 1970s as the most widespread type of autocratic rule.⁵⁵ This often implies that the autocratic elite rules by and through a close network of direct and indirect ties to subordinate actors. Patronage, clientelism, and corruption are the most commonly used instruments.⁵⁶

Concrete measurement again poses some challenges. There is no indicator for co-optation that can be taken off the shelf. Gandhi and Przeworski have introduced a "degree of institutionalization". The basic idea behind this is intriguing. They argue that autocrats need to respond to their corresponding threat level. They use proxy-indicators like the (military or civilian) origin of the leader, the number of changes of the leader, the inherited parties, the percentage of other democracies in the world, and the mineral resource endowment as predictors for institutionalization (meaning: no parties, one party, or more than one party in the legislature). They then compare the number of predicted parties to the actual number and capture the effect of over- and under-institutionalization on dictators' survival.⁵⁷

To further elaborate on Gandhi and Przeworski's idea, the inclusiveness of parties might also be measured by the years in office of the leader's party, the government fractionalization, and the number of cabinet changes. When it comes to binding the military to the ruling regime, the military expenditures, the size of the military, and militaries in cabinets might indicate the intensity of co-optation efforts.⁵⁸

Applying the same reasoning for informal methods, the "demand-side" of co-optation can be captured by the linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural heterogeneity measurements by Alesina and colleagues as well as by Fearon.⁵⁹ Another powerful source is the Ethnic Power Relations Dataset.⁶⁰ However, to what extent this demand is compensated by the use of informal instruments like

clientelism and patronage still depends on the qualitative assessment of country experts. To my knowledge, there is no suitable indicator for larger studies at hand. Given the importance of informal co-optation, to systematically collect data on informal co-optation mechanisms might be a rewarding task for future research.⁶¹ Figure 1 illustrates the three pillars of stability.

The stabilization process

Having set out three crucial concepts – legitimation, repression, and co-optation – that, I argue, are causal for the stability of autocracies, we need to go one step further. Stability refers usually to a status quo, while stabilization refers to a process. Autocracies rest on the three pillars, but how do these pillars come about? The pillars are not in existence from the very beginning of the regime, but need to be built over time. As depicted in Table 2, I suggest that we need to focus on three processes that take place *within* and *between* these pillars to explain the stabilization processes:

- (1) exogenous reinforcement processes that are propelled by the availability of outside power and material resources of the regime, but take place within the pillars;
- (2) self-reinforcing processes within the pillars that lead to path-dependency; and

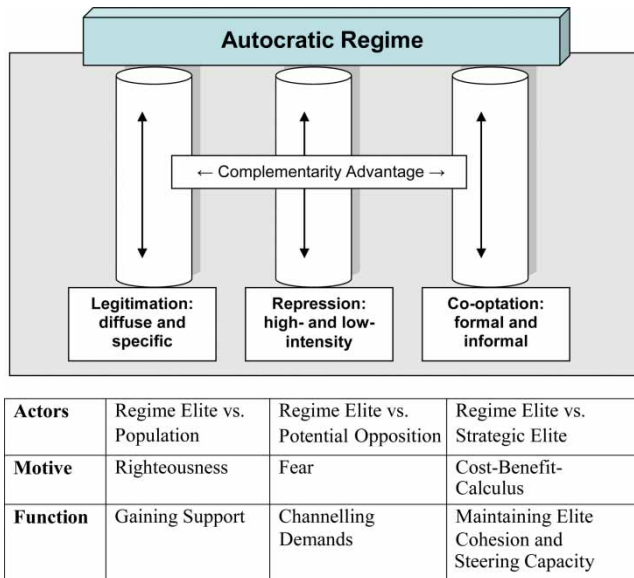


Figure 1. The three pillars of stability (adapted from Gerschewski et al., “Warum überleben Diktaturen”).

Table 2. The processes of reinforcement within and between the pillars.

		Legitimation	Repression	Co-optation
Endogenous self-reinforcement	Within the pillars	Legitimation mechanism that can be self-reinforced by: - high starting costs - learning effects - network effects	Power mechanism that can be self-reinforced by: - high starting costs - learning and coordination effect - network effects	Utilitarian mechanism that can be self-reinforced by: - adaptive expectations - learning and coordination effects
Exogenous reinforcement	Within the pillars	Reinforcing legitimation, repression, and co-optation is dependent on the available power and material resources of the ruling regime		
Reciprocal reinforcement	Between the pillars	Emergence of complementarity advantages between legitimation, repression, and co-optation		

- (3) reciprocal reinforcement processes and the emergence of complementarity advantages between the pillars.

In the following section, I will theorize on these processes, explicitly spell out what we would need to observe if the theory holds, and draw on empirical cases for illustrative purposes.

Reinforcing autocratic rule within the pillars

In order to adequately theorize the time-dimensional character of the process *within* the pillars, I borrow insights from the rich neo-institutional literature.⁶² In order to uncover their stabilizing effect, I argue that the three pillars need to be institutionalized over time.⁶³ The criss-crossing of multiple interactions that take place within the “arena” of legitimation, repression, and co-optation needs to go beyond a mere situational and ad hoc basis and needs to develop into stable institutions. In this sense, institutions are here understood as behavioural patterns. They are “compliance procedures and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals”.⁶⁴ Institutionalized legitimation means that citizens have internalized the legitimating norm; institutionalized repression would mean that oppositional actors are structurally prevented from revolting; and institutionalized co-optation represents an interaction between political elite on the one hand and business and military elites on the other hand, in which cooperation benefits outweigh the costs. But *how* does the institutionalization process take place?

In answering this question, I identify two different processes within the pillars. The first one is the more widespread and “normal” case of an *exogenously* reinforced institutionalization. The second one is theoretically very appealing, but empirically rarer: a *self-reinforcing* institutionalization process in the case of increasing returns. The distinction is drawn for analytical clarity, but should not rule out the possibility that these logics change, and sometimes parallel.

The most common and intuitive form of institutionalization refers to a process that is not self-sustaining, but needs to be propelled externally, that is in our case from outside the pillars. Legitimation, repression, and co-optation have no in-built self-reinforcing mechanism, but they are in need of constant external drive. Therefore they are more vulnerable and dependent on the availability of external resources. The power and material resources determine the limits of the institutionalization process. If the political regime elites are no longer able, due to hard budget constraints and/or declining power resources, to foster legitimation within the population, to uphold a functioning repression apparatus, or to distribute enough material benefits to co-opt strategic actors in a sufficient way, the institutionalization process within the pillars comes to a halt. To use a metaphor, the ruling regime acts like a plate spinner who needs to hold the plates (the institutions) in motion constantly, otherwise the plates fall, and the institutionalization process ends.⁶⁵

The second form of institutionalization process refers to path-dependent explanations. Once an institution is set on track, the path is difficult to alter and

reinforces itself. Mahoney has proposed different mechanisms of self-reinforcement: a legitimation mechanism that reproduces itself “because actors believe it is morally just or appropriate”;⁶⁶ a mechanism based on power asymmetries; and a utilitarian mechanism that reproduces itself due to corresponding cost-benefit calculations.⁶⁷ These three mechanisms can be adopted. Legitimation can reinforce itself due to the nurturing of people’s supporting attitudes vis-à-vis the regime. Repression functions by reproducing power asymmetries between the ruler and the opposition. Co-optation can be seen as more strategic action, in which both the ruling elite and the elite to be co-opted weigh their individual costs and benefits.

In line with Mahoney, I argue that these mechanisms are self-reinforcing, which leads to path-dependency, and also concur with him that, for analytical added value, we need to go beyond a “history-matters” argument. I part company, however, when it comes to show this phenomenon empirically. I suggest narrowing down path-dependency to demonstrate that these mechanisms exhibit increasing returns.⁶⁸ Stemming originally from economics, increasing returns occur when a change of one unit on the explanatory side is followed by a change of more than one unit on the explanandum. In other words, the marginal costs that occur when “producing” one more unit decrease with growing numbers of the product. The marginal cost curve is convex and monotonically decreasing.

Although path-dependency is often posited in social science explanations, it is much rarer than the aforementioned exogenously-propelled institutionalizations. But what would we need to observe empirically? How can we know if a process is self-reinforcing, instead of being reproduced by exogenous sources? This indeed poses a challenge, but increasing returns and therefore self-reinforcement processes can occur when we observe the following:

- (1) *High fixed or set-up costs* that are amortized with growing numbers and that result in a situation in which subsequent investments in alternative projects become costlier, sometimes even ruling them out.
- (2) *Learning and coordination effects* due to additional knowledge or experience make the production process more efficient, so that costs decrease and higher returns are to be expected.
- (3) The creation of *adaptive expectations* refers to the effect of anticipation. Actors form their future expectations on the base of current information and adapt their behaviour to it, with self-fulfilling effects. If a person projects, for example, that the use of one technology will supersede an alternative, then s/he acts in a way that means that this comes true.
- (4) The *network effect* refers to the benefits of a network good that increases disproportionately with the number of users of this good, for example a telephone’s benefit increases from four and five users by 12 to 20 possible connections.

Let me illustrate this with some empirical examples. The diffusion of a “legitimacy belief” can be understood as a network good that is mostly connected to high

initial start-up costs that trigger subsequent investments and make alternatives costlier, sometimes even crowding them out. Take the case of North Korea. While in the 1950s, a limited pluralism of *Weltanschauungen* was still observable, the rapid spread of the Juche ideology after its first public mentioning in 1955 is a good case in point. While initial propaganda efforts sidelined and catalyzed the dissemination of the Juche idea, its spread was at least to some extent self-reinforcing. Adding new believers as nodes to the network led to a disproportional increase in the network's countrywide coverage. The possible connections within this belief network increased sharply, leading to a reduction of marginal "persuasion costs".⁶⁹

Repression can also be interpreted as a network good whose dynamic institutionalization process is self-reinforcing. Analogous to telephones or railways, the regime elite tries to infiltrate and penetrate society. Following the famous dictum of Mussolini that the party should be the capillary organization of the regime,⁷⁰ adding one new regime party office or one security police facility in the country can increase its benefit for the regime beyond the one unit that is invested. To stick to the North Korean example, the institutionalization of the repression and surveillance apparatus at the end of the 1950s can be interpreted as following this network logic of repression. Within a relatively short period of time, a dense network of prison camps of various types and societal controlling mechanisms were installed all over the country, which made the repression mechanism – at least temporarily – self-reinforcing. In addition, coordination effects not just facilitated, but also reinforced, the construction and maintenance of the North Korean repression apparatus. Secret Service, Secret Police, the Ministry for Public Security, the Ministry of State Security, and the Ministry of Defence began to coordinate their work in the 1950s, which led to increasing returns.⁷¹

Learning and coordination effects might be detected in autocracies' co-optation efforts. Hlaing argues persuasively for the Burmese case that the Tatmadaw, the military organization, has undergone a stabilizing process after its electoral defeat in 1988 and the withdrawal of Ne Win. The way the co-optation mechanisms have been balanced out and fine-tuned over the last two decades suggests that a case for path-dependency and organizational learning can be made here as well. The Burmese junta institutionalized a system of collecting incriminating evidence against military officers in the event that they were to be disciplined. Moreover, they perfected the rule of "reserving" discrete domains of operation, which gave officers enough benefit to remain loyal to the regime while none of them got too powerful.⁷² In this light, co-optation, repression, and legitimation were not just exogenously propelled by the regime elite via huge material investments, but their institutionalization also had internal and structurally in-built reasons.

Reciprocal reinforcement and complementarity between the pillars

Institutions rarely work in isolation, but are part of an institutional ensemble. The relationship between them can, in general, be neutral, substitutive, conflictive, or

complementary. I suggest complementarity between the three pillars. But what does complementarity mean? The most advanced conceptualizations have been offered by economic sociologists and comparative political economists.⁷³ Höpner provides an excellent overview of the research fields that have adopted the concept. He concludes from the various applications that complementarity refers to the concurrence and co-functioning of institutions that constitute together a “whole”.⁷⁴ In addition, I suggest a reciprocal reinforcement between the three pillars. This means that the existence of one pillar provokes that of another, which in turn strengthens the first again, etc.⁷⁵ Reciprocal reinforcement stresses not just the functional interdependence, but also the mutual strengthening.

In the concepts part of this article, I have touched upon the different functions of the pillars. Gaining diffuse and specific support from the citizens is the function of legitimation; channelling the demands from the opposition towards the ruling elite is secured by harder and softer forms of repression; and lastly, maintaining cohesion and steering capability within the elite is fulfilled through the use of formal and informal methods of co-optation. How can these functions be complementary and how can they reinforce reciprocally?

Maintaining elite cohesion is complementary to the function of channelling oppositional demands. Co-opting potentially deviant elites by using formal and informal instruments reduces the danger of the emergence of oppositional leaders, while soft and hard repression raises the mobilization costs for such oppositional figures. We can assume a strong linkage between forms of repression and forms of co-optation. This also holds true for the relationship between co-optation and legitimation. Co-optation binds intra-elite actors to the ruling regime and therefore reduces the danger of an upcoming personal (charismatic) alternative that takes the lead in promoting an alternative *Weltanschauung*. Performance as well as ideational legitimation reduces in turn the persuasion costs, which make co-optation easier.

The Achilles heel can be seen between forms of legitimation and repression. Gaining support decreases the potential for opposition that would need to be repressed. Reciprocally, repression seeks to undermine all attempts of oppositional movements for alternative legitimation sources. However, the linkage between these two pillars is weaker and ambivalent, as repression is a double-edged sword. Davenport has highlighted the “punishment puzzle”, in which the impact of repression on public dissent has been shown as being positive, negative, or non-existent.⁷⁶ Repression comes with unintended consequences and can weaken the legitimation function, which again brings repression mounting problems. This can lead to a destabilizing downward spiral. Moreover, a regime based on strong ideologies might be able to use both forms of repression. The ideology then serves as the hermeneutic frame and even justifies the use of hard repression. However, hard repression might prove to be incompatible with performance-based legitimation. Figure 2 displays the complementarity triangle.

What might we empirically observe if the theoretical claim of reciprocal reinforcement and complementarity is true? Deeg is right in his assessment that

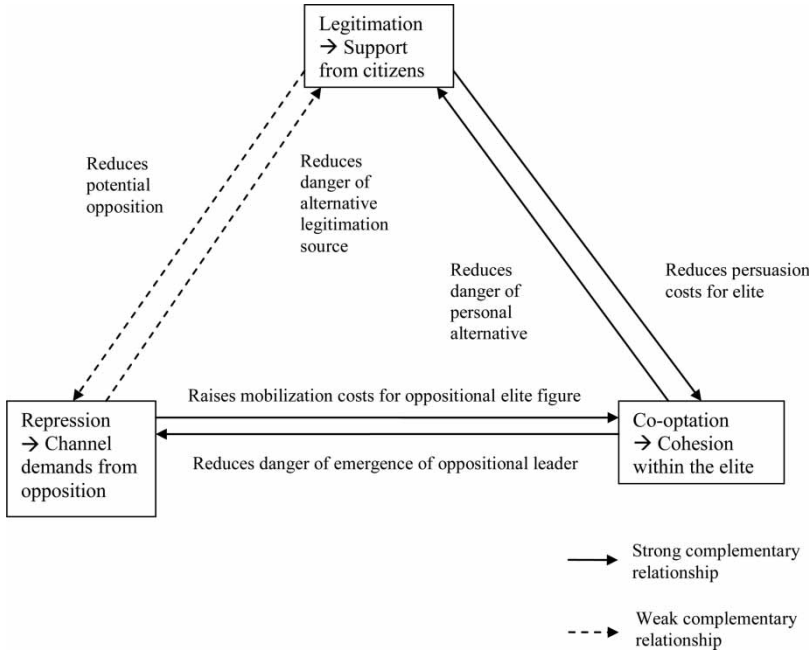


Figure 2. Reciprocal reinforcement and complementarity.

complementarity presumes that the number of successful combinations of elements is limited.⁷⁷ Certain combinations of pillar specifications “go together”. They should not be randomly distributed, but should display systematic patterns. To test the complementarity hypothesis empirically, we would expect that the regimes cluster.

Two stable configurations can be hypothesized to exist. It has been argued above that diffuse support via ideologies and hard repression have been the two most dominant characteristics in classic studies. By adding co-optation, particularly via party structures, we would arrive at one hypothesized stable configuration that leans toward the old totalitarian reasoning: high diffuse support, high soft and hard repression, and formal co-optation. This configuration can aptly be called an “over-politicization configuration”. We might, however, be able to overcome the idiosyncratic tendencies of the totalitarianism paradigm and adequately capture more empirical cases by simultaneously preserving some of the most valuable insights in understanding the essence of such an extreme and ideal-typical regime form.

In the spirit of the work by Linz,⁷⁸ a second path that can be identified is a “de-politicization configuration”. This configuration would exhibit a high degree of performance orientation that would demand more subtle and softer forms of repression as well as co-optation by informal channels, ranging from patronage to clientelistic networks. The result of this stabilizing combination is what O’Donnell has pointedly described as “low-intensity citizenship”.⁷⁹ In particular, the rentier state approach and the literature on developmental authoritarianism

that have been reviewed above have highlighted the idea of an unspoken “social contract” between the performing rulers and those rendered passive.

Empirically showing that these two configurations yield complementarity advantages and therefore lead to stable configurations is still on the agenda for future research. Two routes for causal inference can be identified. Firstly, we can rely on counterfactual theories of causation and engage in deep case studies. We would then need to show that if there is no complementarity, then, *ceteris paribus*, the institutions would perform worse and would suffer from lower efficiency gains.⁸⁰ Secondly, we can increase causal leverage by relying on the regularity theory of causation and could make use of Cluster Analysis or systematic Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). If we find these two clusters over a large number of cases, the regularity with which a certain combination is stable suggests a causal relationship. The “over-politicization” and “under-politicization configuration” would then constitute the “two worlds of autocracies”.

Concluding remarks

When in 1975 Juan Linz wrote his classic handbook article, he was given so much space as there was almost no other entry or reference to non-democracies in the whole six-volume project.⁸¹ With the recent renaissance of autocracy studies, this has changed considerably. New insights have been gained; and while there are still blind spots in understanding autocratic regimes’ inner logic, the academic debate is vital and ongoing. To place this theoretical framework within this discussion was the aim of the article.

I have argued that autocratic regimes rest on three pillars. Legitimation, repression, and co-optation have been derived as key by extracting and synthesizing the main arguments of classic and more recent research efforts. I have paid special attention to re-incorporating legitimation into the studies of autocratic regimes, a dimension that has recently been considered less relevant. In order to account for the time-dependent stabilization process, I have suggested closely looking at three processes: exogenous reinforcement and self-reinforcement within the pillars, and reciprocal reinforcement between them. In this sense, the proposed theoretical framework aims at integrating a static view to explain stability by three causal factors, with a dynamic perspective to uncover the underlying reinforcement mechanisms. To think further along these lines will hopefully prove useful for future cross-case and within-case comparative work.

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discussions with Wolfgang Merkel, Christoph Stefes, and Dag Tanneberg. I am particularly grateful to Alex Schmotz.

Notes

1. Przeworski et al., "What Makes Democracies Endure".
2. For example, Linz, "Authoritarian Regime"; Linz, "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regime"; O'Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*.
3. See recently, among other contributions, Wintrobe, *Political Economy of Dictatorship*; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in Age of Globalization*; Gandhi and Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions"; Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Svobik, "Power Sharing".
4. I refer to "autocracy" as the opposite of democracy. It is therefore used as an overarching umbrella term that encompasses the classic distinction by Linz and others into authoritarian, totalitarian, and post-totalitarian regimes, as well as more recent classification efforts into personalist, one-party, or military regimes. See Tullock, *Autocracy*, 1–17; Merkel, *Systemtransformation*, 40–54. A "regime" is defined here with Fishman as the "formal and informal organization of the center of political power, and of its relations to the broader society", Fishman, "Rethinking State and Regime", 428.
5. I use the term "pillar" here. Others might prefer "arena" or "field" or narrow it down to concrete variables or conditions. In the second part of the article, where I discuss the stabilization process, I argue for an understanding of the three pillars as institutions.
6. The history of non-democratic regimes is of course as long as the one for democracies, with altering notions of, for example, tyranny, despotism, absolutism, feudalism, or dictatorships. A short etymological discussion can be found in Sartori, *Theory of Democracy*.
7. Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship*.
8. The six features are: ideology, mass party, terror system, monopoly of mass communication, monopoly of force, state-run economy.
9. For a further development see Schapiro, *Totalitarianism*, 20.
10. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*.
11. Maier, "Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships", 205.
12. Barber, "Conceptual Foundations".
13. Linz, "Authoritarian Regime"; also Linz, "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes".
14. O'Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. A very helpful and critical review is provided by Remmer and Merckx, "Bureaucratic Authoritarianism Revisited".
15. See, among numerous others, Collier, *The New Authoritarianism*. It has been applied to other cases; see Im, "Bureaucratic Authoritarianism in South Korea".
16. Easton, *A Systems Analysis*.
17. See also Perlmutter's attempt to differentiate between the Corporate State Model and the Praetorian State Model, Perlmutter, *Modern Authoritarianism*, 38–44.
18. See, for example, Finer, *Man on Horseback*; Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics*; Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change, and Modernity*; Beblawi and Luciani, *The Rentier State*.
19. Geddes, "Democratization after Twenty Years"; Merkel, "Are Dictatorships Returning".
20. For an overview, also see two recent German reviews of the relevant literature: Köllner, "Autoritäre Regime"; Kailitz, "Autokratieforschung".
21. Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship*, 47.
22. Gandhi and Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions", 1293; also see Gandhi, *Political Institution under Dictatorship*.

23. Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in Age of Democratization*; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.
24. Schedler, "Elections without Democracy"; Schedler, "Electoral Authoritarianism"; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, "Elections under Authoritarianism".
25. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship*.
26. Gandhi and Przeworski, "Cooperation, Cooptation and Rebellion"; Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing"; Svolik, "Power Sharing".
27. I have proposed a complementary argument as to why the three pillars are crucial for the stability of autocracies by referring to actors' motivation. While in the legitimization pillar, the main motive for the people to support the regime is a sense of righteousness, or at least acquiescence; repression builds on fear as the motive for potential opposition. The motive for elites to be co-opted is a utilitarian cost-benefit calculus. See Gerschewski et al., "Warum überleben Diktaturen?".
28. The most prominent and influential critique stems from Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*.
29. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 122.
30. Kielmannsegg, "Legitimität", 389.
31. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*.
32. See Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft*, 10–28.
33. See, for example, Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria*, 30–54; Albrecht and Schlumberger, "Waiting for Godot", 376–378.
34. Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.
35. Holbig and Gilley, "Legitimacy in China".
36. On the concept of "ideocracies", see Piekalkiewicz and Penn, *Politics of Ideocracy*; on the concept of "theocracies", please refer to, for example, Ferrero and Wintrobe, *Political Economy of Theocracy*.
37. See, for example, Lankov, "Death of North Korean Stalinism".
38. See also the work by Linz and Stepan and their excellent description of the erosion of totalitarianism to post-totalitarian forms of rule; Linz and Stepan, *Democratic Transition*, 42–50.
39. For the economic performance, see White, "Economic Performance and Communist Legitimacy"; and Scharpf, *Governing in Europe* for performance orientation.
40. Easton, *A Systems Analysis*, 268.
41. Easton, *A Systems Analysis*, 444.
42. For a discussion of these sources of legitimization, please refer to Burnell, "Autocratic Opening"; Beetham, *Legitimation of Power*.
43. There is one caveat in using these indicators: while modernization theory would argue that absolute levels of socio-economic indicators measure an increase in the likelihood of democratization, relative indicators that measure growth or decline might be more apt for measuring specific support in autocracies.
44. See The World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
45. Banks and Wilson, *Cross-National Times-Series Data Archive*.
46. Pioneering work is currently done by Kailitz, who typologizes political systems along their legitimization strategy; see Kailitz, "Classification by Legitimation".
47. Protest movements can be framed as a collective action problem; see Chwe, "Collective Action".
48. Davenport, "State Repression", 2.
49. Levitsky and Way, "Competitive Authoritarianism".
50. See Freedom House, "Freedom in the World"; Cingranelli and Richards, "CIRI Human Rights Dataset"; Gibney, Cornett, and Wood, "Political Terror Scale".
51. Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*.

52. Shleifer and Treisman, *Without a Map*, 8–9; Bertocchi and Spagat, “Politics of Co-optation”.
53. The concept of co-optation is limited here to the elite level. Mass co-optation that is directed towards broader parts of the population is subsumed here as a form of generating specific support.
54. Gandhi and Przeworski, “Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion”; Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions”.
55. Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change, and Modernity*.
56. Stefes, *Understanding Post-Soviet Transitions*.
57. Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions”.
58. These indicators can be found in Banks and Wilson, *Cross-National Times-Series Data Archive*; Beck, Keefer, and Clarke, “Database of Political Institutions”.
59. Beck, Keefer, and Clarke, “Database of Political Institutions”; Banks and Wilson, *Cross-National Times-Series Data Archive*; Alesina et al., “Fractionalization”; Fearon, “Ethnic and Cultural Diversity”.
60. Wimmer, Cedermann, and Min, “Ethnic Politics”.
61. Alexander Schmotz is working on a more complex measurement of cooptation. See Schmotz, “Co-optation”.
62. Still the best overview of the three forms of neo-institutionalism is given by Hall and Taylor, “Three New Institutionalism”; for the historical institutionalism, please refer to Thelen, “Historical Institutionalism”.
63. Huntington, *Political Order*, 12.
64. Hall, *Governing the Economy*, 19. See, for a similar definition, North, *Institutions*, 3.
65. I am grateful to Kathleen Thelen who has suggested this metaphor to me.
66. Mahoney, “Path Dependence”, 517.
67. Mahoney identifies a fourth mechanism based on functionalism and systems theory. This mechanism is more to be seen as an overarching mechanism for the stability of the autocratic systems as a whole and does not correspond to the institutionalization process within the pillar. Furthermore, Mahoney sees “reactive sequences” as path-dependent, in which chains of events can be traced back. To what extent these sequences exhibit increasing returns is unclear. Increasing returns are to be seen, however, as a necessary condition for path-dependency, so that reactive sequences will be left out here, being aware that they might feature increasing returns.
68. David, “Economics of QWERTY”; Arthur, *Increasing Returns*; North, *Institutions*. Paul Pierson has made this argument more popular for social sciences; see Pierson, “Increasing Returns”. For excellent discussions on path-dependency, please refer to Beyer, “Mechanisms of Path Dependence”; Rixen and Viola, “Taxonomy of Institutional Change”.
69. See Park, “Nature and Evolution of Juche Ideology”; Suh, *Leadership and Political Culture in North Korea*, 31–53.
70. Gentile, “Party in Italian Fascism”, 263.
71. See Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*. For today’s repression apparatus, please refer to Haggard and Noland, *Witness to Transformation*, 81–100.
72. Hlaing, “Rules for Survival”.
73. The debate has been intensified by Hall and Soskice, *Varieties of Capitalism*.
74. Höpner, “Complementarity”, 383–384.
75. Crouch has pointed to such a relationship; see Crouch, “Three Meanings”, 362.
76. Davenport, “State Repression”, 8.
77. Deeg, “Complementarity and Institutional Change”, 612.

78. See Linz, "Authoritarian Regime", 304. Linz argued then that the Spanish regime elite tried to depoliticize public life to maintain stability.
79. O'Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*, 143.
80. Deeg, "Complementarity", 614.
81. Linz, "Further Reflections".

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