

Autocratic Fate: How Leaders' Post-Tenure Expectations Influence the Behavior of Dictatorships

by Erica Frantz, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, and Natasha Ezrow*

Despite the optimism of modernization theory and the “third wave” of democratization, about 40 percent of the world’s countries are ruled by autocracies.¹ The pervasiveness and persistence of autocratic government underscores the importance of better understanding the political dynamics at play in these regimes. This notion holds particularly true given widespread evidence that a host of “bad” outcomes are correlated with autocracy, ranging from reliance on repression² to high rates of fertility.³ Perhaps in no domain is this more apparent than in international conflict. The democratic peace theory, close to the only “empirical law” in international relations, tells us that democracies rarely fight wars against each other.⁴ Additional evidence also indicates that autocracies are more likely to initiate conflicts,⁵ and be involved in war, more generally.⁶ The spread of democracy can therefore easily be argued to be a path to greater peace.

Though autocratic regimes are generally viewed as more belligerent than their democratic counterparts, there is significant variation in the propensity for military conflict within this group of countries. For example, it is easy to think of war-prone autocrats like Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Idi Amin of Uganda, or Muammar Qaddafi of Libya. However, many long-standing autocracies have been more cautious in their decisions to threaten or use military force, such as Malaysia, ruled since its independence in 1957 by the Barisan Nasional, or Swaziland, ruled since independence in 1968 by a royal family.

*Erica Frantz is an Assistant Professor in the Political Science Department at Bridgewater State University. Andrea Kendall-Taylor works for the United States government. Natasha Ezrow is a Senior Lecturer of Government at the University of Essex.

In the last decade or so, scholars have uncovered a variety of differences across autocracies that bear on their propensity for belligerence.⁷ Common throughout this research agenda is a shift in focus away from the international system towards the decisions of individual leaders. Although autocrats encounter varying levels of constraints on their behavior—military juntas, political parties, or elite cliques—they generally face fewer constraints than their democratic counterparts.⁸ Focusing on the particular factors that alter their incentive structures is thus a promising lens through which to better understand autocratic decisions regarding conflict initiation.

Scholars have recently found in the international relations literature that the prospect of punishment post-ouster—whether it be life in exile, imprisonment, or death—strongly increases the chances of aggression towards other states. Leaders who are more likely to face a “bad fate” when unseated from office are also more likely to resort to conflict to stave off a potential ouster. The risk of a bad fate has also been shown to drive autocratic behavior in other domains. When autocratic leaders—who are likely to face at least one type of post-ouster punishment—do fall, the regime is liable to face similar defeat, the transition is more prone to violence, and the subsequent regime is less likely to be democratic.⁹ As a reflection of this, the evidence indicates that transitions to democracy in the “third wave” have been more likely to fail in instances where outgoing autocratic rulers were punished after leaving office.¹⁰

Given how strongly a leader’s behavior today appears to be conditioned upon his or her prospects tomorrow, it is thus important to gain a sense of the particular features of autocracies that bear on the post-ouster fates of leaders. Greater insight into a leader’s expectations of punishment can inform our judgments about the likelihood that autocrats will initiate wars, as well as the likelihood that the regimes they rule will democratize upon collapse.

In this paper, we first review the relationship between leadership fate and military conflict. We then turn to a discussion of the factors most likely to affect leadership fate, by summarizing those already identified in the literature, such as autocratic regime type, time in office, and economic performance, before pointing out a number of previously unexplored factors that are also correlated with leadership fates. These include: history of intra-regime leadership turnover, foreign aid dependence, method of entry to power, and incidences of coups in neighboring states.

We note that, in line with the literature referred to here, we assume throughout this discussion that leaders are as attuned to their risks of ouster and post-tenure punishment as are observers.

LEADER FATE AND MILITARY CONFLICT

For many years, scholars have hotly debated the merits of the diversionary theory of war,¹¹ which posits that leaders who are at risk of losing power will be more likely to initiate conflict. The underlying assumption of the theory is that leaders value political survival above all else and will behave in ways that prolong their time in office. According to the theory, war is a risky decision for leaders: while victory is expected to boost popularity, defeat increases their chance of ouster. For leaders whose tenures are secure, such a gamble is not in their interest. However for leaders who are politically vulnerable, this risk will be acceptable as it will increase their chances of remaining in power.

Though the theory is compelling, empirical evidence in support of it has been mixed at best. Recent research focusing not just on the desire of leaders to secure their survival in office, but also on the consequences they face upon losing it, provides insights as to why.¹² Some leaders lose power and go on to participate in politics or simply enjoy their retirement. Others are not so lucky, however, and are forced into exile, imprisoned, or even killed. About 75 percent of leaders

fare well upon leaving power; the remaining 25 percent do not. The costs of losing office, in other words, vary dramatically for leaders, and can reasonably be expected to influence their behavior. Leaders who anticipate simply stepping out of the limelight post-tenure are unlikely to engage in risky behavior in a last ditch effort to hold onto power. The costs of their ouster are simply not high enough to impel them to “gamble for survival.”¹³ Leaders who expect to be exiled, imprisoned, or killed upon losing office, by contrast, are likely to do far more to hold onto power. Thus, the gamble of initiating conflict suddenly becomes worth it. Evidence supports diversion’s occurrence, but only when leaders are at risk of an overthrow that brings with it a “bad” post-tenure fate.¹⁴

This insight can contribute to our understanding of why autocrats are more belligerent than democrats. In democracies, transfers of power from one leader to the next are far more likely to be regular, meaning that they occur in accordance with constitutional guidelines.¹⁵ Elections are the primary vehicle through which leadership transitions occur in democratic settings. In contrast, although most autocracies hold elections, they tend to function more as tools to generate support for the regime than as an actual means for leadership turnover.¹⁶ Therefore, in autocracies, established mechanisms for ensuring the smooth transfer of power from one leader to the next are simply less common. Moreover, leadership transfers are far more likely to be irregular, often occurring in the form of coups, mass rebellions, or foreign overthrows. The manner in which leaders lose power has significant consequences for their fate: when leadership transfers are irregular as opposed to regular, leaders are significantly more likely to face exile, imprisonment, or death in the process or soon after.¹⁷ Furthermore, since autocracies are more likely to feature irregular transfers of power, their leaders are more likely to face costly post-tenure prospects, which in turn make them more likely to initiate wars.¹⁸

An example from Uganda helps illustrate this dynamic. By 1978, Idi Amin, in power since 1971, had become increasingly unpopular at home as a result of years of disastrous economic policies and the use of erratic brutality against citizens, including members of his inner circle.¹⁹ Tensions culminated later that year, when General Mustafa Adrisi, Amin's vice president, was injured in a suspicious car accident. Troops loyal to Adrisi, along with a number of other disgruntled soldiers, rebelled in response, and Amin feared he would soon be ousted.²⁰ In an attempt to divert attention from growing national instability, Amin invaded Tanzania and annexed part of its Kagera region.²¹

Similarly, the former leader of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, who came to power in 1992, constantly feared he was at risk of being overthrown in a coup. His fears were not unfounded, given that he had survived two previous coup attempts (in 1994 and again in 1995).²² In response to this climate of domestic insecurity, Shevardnadze engaged in a series of provocations with Russia. There were 268 Georgian assaults on Russian installations in 1992, killing 29 Russian troops, and repeated attacks by Georgian paramilitary forces against Russian peacekeeping forces in the breakaway region of Abkhazia from 1994 to 1997, killing 40 Russian soldiers.²³

Though it is difficult to say with certainty that the risk of being forced out of power (and the punishment likely to come afterwards) caused Amin to invade Tanzania or Shevardnadze to provoke Russia, the evidence is consistent with this interpretation. Leaders at risk of overthrow *who fear they will face bad fates post-tenure* are more likely to engage in belligerent behavior in the international arena in a last-ditch effort to hold onto power.

Beyond international conflict behavior, this connection also helps to explain why some dictatorships are more prone to violence upon collapse and why some are less likely to democratize. When leaders face a real risk of post-tenure punishment, they are apt to cling to

power at all costs in order to avoid an uncomfortable or violent fate. Their ousters, as a result, often entail the use of violent force, making democratization less likely.²⁴

Given the importance of the post-exit fate of leaders for understanding decisions to initiate conflict and the strong connection between autocracy and costly fates, we now turn to examining the particular factors that increase the likelihood that autocrats will suffer costly fates upon their ouster.

EXPLAINING THE LIKELIHOOD OF A BAD FATE

Thus far, only a handful of studies in the literature have explored the specific conditions that increase the likelihood that leaders will be punished upon their ouster, and even fewer have examined such factors specifically in autocratic contexts. To be clear, many studies have looked at leadership survival patterns in autocracies,²⁵ but few have identified what makes one “retirement” path more probable than the next. In this section, we review those factors the literature has found to influence the post-tenure fate of autocrats and point out a number of new factors that are also associated with costly post-tenure fates.²⁶ By increasing our understanding of the conditions that make a leader’s punishment upon exit more likely, we enhance our ability to anticipate where conflict could erupt.

What We Know about the Post-exit Fate of Dictators

Several studies have shown that regime type affects how dictators can expect to fare upon their departure from power.²⁷ Democrats are far more likely than autocrats to enjoy a safe retirement. However, autocracies are not one and the same; there is significant variation in “types” of autocratic regimes. These differences in autocratic regime types stem from the variety of rules that determine the group from which leaders can be drawn and who then influence policy. Variation in autocratic regime type, in turn, affects the fates of the leaders that rule them.

There are two central findings in this regard. First, research has shown that civilian autocrats are more likely to “enjoy a safe retirement” than military autocrats or those leaders who wear or have ever worn a military uniform.²⁸ Civilian autocrats, as a consequence, are less likely to be involved in war than their military counterparts. Researchers have suggested that this finding stems from the capacity for violence that military leaders or former military members possess. Once overthrown, these leaders cannot credibly commit that they will not use these ties to seize power down the road, forcing their successors to exile, imprison, or kill them in order to deter their return to power.²⁹

A recent study by Abel Escribà-Folch shows that leaders of personalist autocratic regimes—where power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual—are the most likely to face a bad fate after withdrawing from power.³⁰ Personalist dictatorships tend to lack mechanisms for regulating leadership succession, leading challengers to assess that the only way to take power is by ousting the incumbent.³¹ In addition, personalist autocratic regimes tend to collapse with the fall of the leader. Regime insiders often have little chance of participating in a subsequent regime due to their close association with the outgoing autocrat, unless they themselves seize power and force the leader out. Moreover, because the regime lacks procedures for handling leadership succession, the disgruntled masses, often excluded from rent distributions in personalist regimes, have no other means to voice their discontent besides taking up arms. Personalist leaders, therefore, are frequently ousted through irregular and often violent methods and, as a result, are often forced into exile, imprisoned, or killed post-ouster.

Escribà-Folch points out that in contrast to personalist regimes, political parties and/or military organizations manage the succession process in other, more institutionalized dictatorships. In these other autocratic regime types, leadership transitions occur via some form

of established procedures, lowering the risk of irregular leader exit. In addition, in institutional dictatorships, organizations (i.e. parties and/or militaries) can protect the interests of elites in a subsequent regime. In such cases, transitions tend to occur more peacefully, thus further reducing the risk that leaders will be punished post-tenure. Nevertheless, military ruled dictatorships feature elites with easy access to weapons (and the skills to use them), making coups a frequent mode of intra-regime leadership transition in these autocracies. Though leaders of military dictatorships tend to fare better than leaders of personalist dictatorships post-tenure, their risk of a bad fate is slightly higher than leaders of dominant-party regimes for this very reason.

These previous two findings—namely that both men in uniform and personalist leaders are most prone to harmful post-tenure fates—appear to be inconsistent with each other. However, we note that more than half of personalist leaders wear (or have worn) a military uniform, creating substantial overlap between military autocrats (as identified by the data set used in the first set of studies) and personalist dictatorships (as identified by the data set used in the second). In other words, because one data set measures characteristics of the leader and the other measures institutionalization of the regime, it is possible for both findings to be true.³² By merging the two data sets together, it is evident that the data supports this claim. The data indicates that most personalist leaders in uniform were punished after ouster (76 percent), followed by civilian personalist leaders (63 percent), far fewer non-personalist leaders in uniform (50 percent) and even fewer civilian non-personalist leaders (37 percent). The likelihood that leaders will be punished after ouster is the highest among personalist leaders in uniform (76 percent), slightly lower for civilian personalist leaders (63 percent), quite a bit lower for non-personalist leaders in uniform (50 percent), and the lowest for civilian non-personalist leaders (37 percent). Indeed, their conflict initiation patterns reflect this: personalist leaders in uniform are the most likely to

initiate conflict, followed by civilian personalist leaders, leaders of military regimes, and lastly, leaders of dominant-party regimes.³³

The major message to emerge from the research in this area, therefore, is that we can expect leaders of personalist dictatorships to be particularly belligerent in the international arena when under pressure of ouster, particularly if they are in or have previously worn a military uniform. Recent experiences in Iraq with Saddam Hussein illustrate this well. Personalist leaders in uniform currently in power (as of this writing) include Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, Idriss Déby of Chad, Denis Sassou-Nguesso of the Republic of Congo, and Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia.

A number of other factors, beyond regime type, are also associated with negative fates for leaders upon retirement. Poor economic performance at the time of ouster, for example, is particularly troublesome for autocrats. Research indicates that poor economic performance, both in terms of low economic growth and poverty, increases the chances of autocratic overthrow through unconstitutional procedures.³⁴ Such forced removals in turn boost the chances of bad post-tenure fates. According to Escribà-Folch, economic crises increase the risk of punishment because citizens and elites, whose own pocketbooks are directly affected by the downturn, blame the dictator for incompetence, mismanagement, and the predatory behavior that caused the crisis.³⁵ Such discontent often manifests itself in the form of mass protest or coup, both of which are associated with worse fates for autocrats. As a result, low economic growth rates at the time of ouster increase the chance of a bad fate, as does a lower Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (a reflection of long-term performance).³⁶

The evidence also suggests that the number of years in office impacts how leaders fare once removed. Dictators who hold power for longer periods of time are more likely to face a negative

fate afterwards.³⁷ Longer time in office is often a sign of greater personalization of power and, in turn, accumulation of grievances. Under such circumstances, once leaders are removed, they are frequently punished for their long history of autocratic behavior. This is evidenced, for instance, in the popular uprisings that occurred in the Arab Spring against a number of long-standing autocrats.³⁸

New Insights into the Determinants of Autocratic Leader Fate

Given the importance of understanding a leader's perception of his or her fate upon removal from office, we highlight a number of new factors here that are also associated with the post-exit punishment of autocrats.³⁹ Although a causal relationship cannot be assured, identification of these factors is an important first step toward developing a more robust understanding of autocratic leader fate.

The first variable we identify is dependence on foreign aid. Using data from the World Development Indicators, we look at foreign aid as a percent of Gross National Income (GNI) from 1960, the earliest year these data are available, through 2004, the latest year for which leadership data are available. We find that aid-dependent autocracies are more likely to have leaders who are punished post-tenure. Among autocracies that receive little foreign aid (less than 1 percent of their GNI), over three-fifths (61 percent) of leaders enjoy a safe retirement. In contrast, leaders of aid-dependent autocracies (where aid comprises more than 10 percent of their GNI), have a 50 percent chance of emerging relatively unscathed. Therefore, we posit that greater aid dependence may enable autocrats to engage in predatory behavior, fattening their coffers at the expense of the rest of the citizenry. This may make the population particularly disgruntled, thereby increasing the likelihood that the leader will face punishment upon ouster.

To ensure that this finding is not being driven by dynamics in low income countries, which in turn may be more likely to receive aid, we disaggregated autocracies into three groups based on their levels of development (GDP per capita, as measured by the World Development Indicators): poor (bottom quartile of GDP per capita), middle income (second and third quartiles of GDP per capita), and rich (top quartile of GDP per capita). Although leaders of more developed countries face a more promising post-tenure fate, as noted in the previous section, aid dependence makes perilous post-tenure fates more likely, regardless of the level of development. Among wealthy autocracies, those the leaders who are reliant on aid have a 38 percent chance of suffering a bad fate, a number that goes down to 30 percent for those who are not aid dependent. For middle-income autocracies, these numbers are 48 percent and 39 percent, respectively. Aid dependence has the most substantial impact, however, in poor autocracies; leaders of aid dependent autocracies have a 59 percent risk of a bad fate, as opposed to a 40 percent risk for leaders of autocracies that do not receive substantial foreign aid allotments. This finding suggests that poverty coupled with aid dependence at the time of ouster can foster popular discontent and in turn punishment of the leader. The allocation of aid to autocrats may give them further resources to pad their bank accounts and thus fuel the flames of their opponents, such that when these leaders are overthrown they face a dismal future.

We also find that autocrats who come to power in regimes which have survived at least one leadership transition (without collapsing themselves) are more likely to fare well post-tenure. The percentage of leaders who enjoy a safe retirement upon losing power is only 44 percent in regimes that have never experienced a leadership transition. This number increases to 55 percent, however, once the regime has experienced one leadership transition, 57 percent once it has experienced two, 77 percent once it has experienced three, and 79 percent once it has

experienced at least four. The message that surfaces here is that dictatorships that prove themselves capable of managing the leadership succession process create environments in which their leaders are less likely to suffer post-ouster. This situation most likely occurs because the very regimes that survive leadership transitions are those that have institutionalized the leadership succession process such that transitions are more likely to occur via established guidelines, in turn helping to secure a positive fate for the outgoing leader. The results imply that a dictator like Ali Khamenei of Iran, who is the second Supreme Leader of the Iranian theocracy, should be more likely to face a good fate than a dictator like Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, whose regime has yet to manage a leadership transition, all else being equal. As a consequence, we might expect more belligerent behavior from leaders in the latter scenario when they are at risk of overthrow than from those in the former.

An additional factor influencing the likelihood that autocratic leaders will face a bad fate is political instability among neighboring countries. More specifically, the occurrence of coups in neighboring states (within a two thousand kilometer radius) raises the risk that leaders will be punished post-exit.⁴⁰ Leaders whose neighbors experienced no coups that year, have a 57 percent chance of a good fate should they fall from power. This number decreases to 54 percent for leaders who have one neighbor that experienced a coup that year and it plummets to 37 percent for leaders who have at least two neighbors that experienced a coup that year. The trend is similar, albeit weaker, when we look at experiences with coups in neighboring states the year prior: with no neighboring coups, the chance of a good fate for the leader post-ouster is 67 percent; with one coup, this number decreases to 63 percent; and with two or more coups, it decreases to 57 percent. As this evidence suggests, coups in neighboring states increase the likelihood that they will also occur domestically, thus increasing the chances that the leader will

encounter punishment upon removal from power. Regional instability (as manifest in multiple coups), therefore, may generate more aggressive behavior on the part of autocrats fearing that they, too, are at risk of being ousted in the same manner.

The last factor we identify is the manner in which autocrats come to power. We find that those who enter power via regular means, such as elections or other constitutional guidelines, are more likely to face good fates than those who come to power via irregular means.⁴¹ We find that 57 percent of the time the autocrats who come to power through established procedures enjoy safe retirements, while autocrats who come to power unconstitutionally, only incur safe retirements 41 percent of the time. This finding is most likely driven by the tendency for leaders to exit power in the same manner that they enter it. Leaders with regular entries are more likely to have regular exits, just as leaders with irregular entries are more likely to have irregular exits.⁴² Being attuned to how autocrats come to power, therefore, can inform our expectations of how they will fare when they exit, and, as a consequence shape our understanding of how they may behave in the international arena should they face domestic pressure.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the post-exit fate of dictators has the potential to help us better anticipate the behavior of autocratic states on a range of issues, including how they will fall from power, their prospects for democratization, and the types of policies they will pursue while still in office. A leader who expects to be exiled, imprisoned or killed once deposed often makes vastly different decisions under pressure than a leader who anticipates a peaceful retirement, particularly when it comes to international conflict.⁴³

For this reason, this study identifies a number of key factors associated with the fates of autocratic leaders after they leave power. These factors include some already identified in the

existing literature, such as autocratic regime type, time in power, and economic performance; along with others that have yet to receive attention, such as history of intra-regime leadership turnover, reliance on foreign aid, method of entry into power, and the number of coups in neighboring states. Although not all leaders who rule in environments associated with bad post-tenure fates will instigate wars, a greater focus on their incentives and how their fates structure them can help political observers identify those countries with an elevated risk of belligerence.

Muammar Qaddafi provides a good illustration. The Libyan leader, who assumed power in 1969 via a coup, exhibited aggressive international behavior while in office on a number of occasions. In 1973, for example, Qaddafi sent troops into Chad in an effort to conquer the Aouzou Strip. Given the evidence presented here, the notion that Qaddafi would incite provocations such as this one should not be surprising; after all, he was a personalist leader in uniform who came to power via irregular means, isolating the country internationally at the expense of its economic prosperity.

Similarly, greater consideration of post-tenure fate can provide additional insight into the way events are likely to unfold once an autocrat is under threat. Not only are leaders who are at risk of post-ouster punishment more likely to start wars, they are also more likely to cling to power at all costs.⁴⁴ When under pressure at home, such autocrats can be expected to hold on to power until the very end, as Qaddafi did until he was killed in 2011 by Libyan rebel forces. Thus, the research presented here implies that political observers interested in promoting peace and democratization may be well advised to seek ways to offer dictators at risk of bad fates a safe exit.

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