Rethinking leader-elite relations: Regime type, coalition dynamics, and cabinet stability in African dictatorships

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My dissertation investigates the ways in which regime type influences cabinet stability in African autocracies and how cabinet instability influences economic and human development. While an abundance of research on authoritarian regimes explains how institutions such as parties and legislatures influence leader and regime tenure, often making assumptions about the loyalty of individuals within those institutions toward the leader (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Geddes 2003; Magaloni, 2008), very little scholarship has systematically analyzed the interactions between leaders and elites posited in theories of authoritarian leader and regime tenure. As a result, we have very little systematic knowledge on how authoritarian leaders manage their cabinets, often resulting in the use of examples of either the incredibly long or short minister tenure to support a particular assumption about leader-elite interactions in authoritarian regimes. My dissertation provides clearer theoretical expectations of minister tenure in Africa’s authoritarian regimes, empirical testing of those expectations using an original dataset of 5,435 ministers from 35 African countries between 1976 and 2010, and investigates the impact of cabinet instability on economic and human development.

My dissertation is comprised of three article manuscripts. In the first, I argue that authoritarian regime type determines the importance of credible power-sharing agreements between leaders and cabinet ministers and thus determines the constraints leaders face when choosing to dismiss ministers. I expect that leaders of dominant party autocracies are much more constrained in their ability to dismiss ministers than leaders of personal or military regimes. Using my original dataset, I conduct a number of quantitative analyses which support the claim that leader constraints in dominant party regimes result in fewer minister firings. I also show that dominant party leaders exhibit greater regularity in their firings of ministers, using elections as a mechanism to share power with a new group of elites and as a bulwark against criticism of failed power-sharing. Additionally, these findings are illustrated through a brief case study of Daniel arap Moi’s cabinet management in Kenya, a case classified as a dominant party regime by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014). This manuscript was revised and resubmitted to the British Journal of Political Science at the end of October and I am awaiting a decision from the editor.

The second manuscript takes a closer look at the tenure of individual ministers by focusing on how the different coalition dynamics between leaders and ministers across authoritarian regimes types produces distinct temporal patterns of minister dismissal risk. Building on the theory developed in the first manuscript, I argue that by frequently firing ministers before

1I classify authoritarian regimes using the dataset of Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014).
they have the opportunity to establish themselves in the cabinet, dominant party leaders send a signal that loyal party membership will not be rewarded with meaningful power-sharing. This undermines the value of party membership and encourages party elites to challenge the incumbent. In contrast, personal and military leaders, at least in African states, are less reliant on credible power-sharing with cabinet ministers and dismiss them more rapidly. While some ministers in personal and military regimes will manage to show their value in the cabinet and loyalty to the leader, I expect most to face an intense “weeding out” process in initial years of their tenure. Through a number of quantitative analyses, I demonstrate that this results in two distinct patterns of minister dismissal risk over time. Ministers in dominant party regimes face a low and relatively constant exit risk over their tenure, with the only notable increases occurring following authoritarian elections. Conversely, ministers in personal and military regimes face a much higher risk of dismissal in the early years of their tenure. This dismissal risk decreases over time, but only converges with the dismissal risk of ministers in dominant party regimes after 7 or 8 years, after which most personal and military regime ministers have already been dismissed. This manuscript improves our understanding of government stability in authoritarian regimes and, unlike existing work contrasting minister tenure in authoritarian regimes and democracies using selectorate theory (Quiroz-Flores, 2009; Quiroz-Flores & Smith, 2011), is able to explain variation in minister tenure across different authoritarian regimes. I am currently making revisions to the manuscript and will submit it to Comparative Political Studies in late January.

The final manuscript, which is currently in progress, seeks to determine the costs of cabinet instability in terms of economic and human development. Much of the existing work on political instability and economic growth (e.g., Aisen and Veiga, 2012; Alesina et al., 1996; Chen & Feng, 1996; Jong-A-Pin, 2009) finds that political instability negatively impacts growth. However, existing scholarship has only just begun distinguishing between overall regime instability and within-regime instability, often using highly aggregated measures to do so. I provide a theoretically and empirically superior measure of within-regime instability that allows me to conduct more detailed analyses on the impact of within-regime stability in the economic, health, and education sectors. I also provide a more detailed theory connecting within-regime instability to development than is available in existing work by drawing on the first two articles in my dissertation. Additionally, I extend the work of Africanist scholars (e.g., LeVan & Assenov, 2013; van de Walle, 2001) by showing that the instability of African cabinets is more damaging than their size. The collection of manuscripts in my dissertation thus provides a more comprehensive understanding of cabinet instability in Africa and how that instability influences economic and human development.

Campos & Nugent (2002) find no relationship, and argue that existing findings are driven primarily by African countries.