

Blog post for “The Dictator’s Powersharing Dilemma: Countering Dual Outsider Threats”
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Dictators have no friends. Even seemingly close allies pose threats of overthrow. Thus, rulers face a critical choice: does they want to face a particular elite faction on the “inside”—that is, sharing greater power and spoils—or the “outside”? The standard idea is that very strong outsider threats compel rulers to share power at the center, despite the downside of providing insiders with quick-strike ability to overthrow the government in a coup. Yet, the logic of the powersharing dilemma is considerably more complicated than that. Four conditions are key for explaining the strategic interaction between dictators are elites.

First, rulers vary in their ability to guard against coup attempts, and rulers are better-placed when they personally control officer promotions or there are broader political institutions in place that make coups difficult. However, rulers with *weak coup-proofing institutions* face an intractable dilemma. For example, Portugal refused to grant independence to Angola. Rather than participate in elections and build inter-ethnic institutions, fractured Angolan factions instead had to fight for power. The faction that gained control at independence knew that, by excluding rival groups, it would almost certainly face continued rebellion. But sharing power would have instead risked an insider coup attempt, a more imminent threat. As a result, the Angolan government fought a decades-long civil war rather than share power.

Second, some rulers face elite factions that are *entrenched in power*. For example, in many ex-colonies, members of ethnic minority groups with better access to educational opportunities dominated the military officer corps—but not civilian political positions—at independence. Attempting to exclude entrenched elites will likely trigger a countercoup or rebellion. This helps to explain cases such as Nigeria immediately after independence where the government tolerated a tenuous powersharing agreement with members of an ethnic minority group, despite viewing them as rivals.

Rulers face threats not only from rival elite factions, but also from the masses. Dictators cannot share power with politically organized masses in any meaningful way without transitioning to democracy. Thus, maintaining the incumbent authoritarian regime requires expanding the military to repress the public more effectively. However, this reaction simply recreates the powersharing dilemma with elites because additional elite factions incorporated into the military themselves pose a coup threat. This tradeoff underpins the final two conditions.

Third, a strong mass threat eliminates the ruler’s powersharing dilemma if the elites harbor *low affinity toward mass rule*, such as Malaysian business elites that feared communist rule, or whites in apartheid South Africa that feared African majority rule. In such cases, elites fearful of mass rule will not attempt coups if they are included in government. They want to present a unified front against the mass threat, rather than weaken the center through internal struggles.

Elites shying away from challenging the ruler yields another consequence—stronger mass threats can increase a ruler’s security in office. Not only do elites pose a minimal threat when they fear mass rule, but their cooperation with the ruler can generate a strong state that can withstand

overthrow by the masses. This is the fourth condition, *high returns to elite coalitions*. In cases like Malaysia and South Africa, mass threats held together dictatorships rather than tore them apart.

Overall, studying these conditions using a game-theoretic model deepens our understanding of how dictators resolve their powersharing dilemma. Such understanding is a prerequisite for developing effective policies to mitigate political violence.