

Overview of Project on Authoritarian Power Sharing

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All dictators confront threats to their survival in office. One strategy to mitigate threats is to *share power* with challengers. For example, a ruler can offer positions in the cabinet or legislature to co-opt members of mass societal opposition organizations or of different ethnic groups. Sharing power enhances the ruler's *commitment* to promises. For example, if challengers gain agenda-setting power within an institutional body, they gain policy-making power that may be difficult for the ruler to reverse. Alternatively, power-sharing deals may provide challengers with the coercive means to defend their spoils. For example, offering certain cabinet positions, in particular the Minister of Defense portfolio, enables elites to develop ties with military officers. Thus, their claim to future spoils is backed by the threat of a coup if the ruler tries to renege.

Yet sharing power also entails drawbacks for the ruler. Not only does this strategy diminish the ruler's rents, but it can potentially backfire by making the ruler's tenure less secure. By bringing challengers closer to the center of power and bolstering their coercive capability, sharing power creates a *threat-enhancing* effect. High-ranking elites can exercise their ability to stage a coup to *remove the leader*, rather than using this leverage as a latent threat to *prevent the ruler from transgressing on promised spoils*.

Jointly, these two effects create a dilemma of authoritarian power sharing. Ostensibly, the goal of sharing power is to prevent violent overthrow, but is this strategy effective? Under what conditions do dictators share power with challengers, as opposed to marginalizing them? Existing research tends to analyze either the commitment effect or threat-enhancing effect in isolation. In particular, most comparative politics research on authoritarian institutions focuses primarily on commitment ability and tends to conclude that sharing power promotes regime survival. By contrast, international relations research on ethnic conflict and civil war settlements tends to instead emphasize how power-sharing arrangements threaten the ruler.

My central insight is that we cannot understand authoritarian power sharing without analyzing *both consequences* of sharing power. In empirical work, I identify factors that account for *why the commitment effect dominates the threat-enhancing effect*, or vice versa. In doing so, I provide new insights into causes of authoritarian regime stability and civil wars in Africa. In applied theoretical work, I challenge the standard idea that strong coercive threats make rulers more willing to share power; which yields empirical implications for ethnic power sharing, the guardianship dilemma, and the development of parliaments in Europe.

Empirical Evidence on Power Sharing in Africa

How regimes gain power affects prospects for peaceful power sharing. In joint work with Anne Meng, we argue that the dangers of sharing power are less acute for rulers that gained power via a rebellion (“Power Sharing and Authoritarian Stability: How Rebel Regimes Solve the Guardianship Dilemma”; R&R at *APSR*). Using originally collected data, we document that rebel regimes in Africa are strikingly durable. We estimate that rebel regimes are less than half as likely to break down than authoritarian regimes formed by other means. Furthermore, rebel regimes are significantly more likely to name someone (other than the ruler) to the position of Minister of Defense. This is a key element of sharing power with the military because it delegates control of the military to a separate institution beyond the ruler’s direct control.

We propose that the launching rebellion provides the foundation for peaceful power sharing and authoritarian durability. Upon establishing their regime, rebel regime leaders have already interacted and shared power with their top subordinates—they did so during the struggle to gain power. When facing an intense armed struggle, leaders improve battlefield performance by delegating control to military commanders and incorporating them into the central decision-making bodies. Inclusive leadership bodies established during long struggles allow rebel leaders to develop trust and stable power-sharing relationships among their subordinates. After coming into power, rebel movements usually replace the existing state military with their own. Leaders maintain the support of their former co-combatants by appointing them to high-ranking government positions, and these power-sharing arrangements are highly credible due to a history of interactions during the war. By contrast, in many other regimes, power-sharing deals often break down because of mistrust and a persistent internal security dilemma.

The overarching theoretical framework on authoritarian power sharing guides these findings. Because the ruling coalition in rebel regimes is dominated by men with guns, we might expect the threat-enhancing effect of sharing power to be particularly salient. According to the canonical guardianship dilemma, a military that is strong enough to protect the regime against mass unrest and foreign threats is also strong enough to overthrow it via a coup d’etat. We turn this logic on its head by explaining why commitment ability is especially high in rebel regimes, which facilitates stable power sharing.

In another article, I examine how historical factors affect prospects for peaceful power sharing and stability in contemporary regimes. Despite frequent coups and civil wars in post-colonial Africa, many ethnic groups and entire countries have avoided these forms of political conflict. Why does the power-sharing dilemma force some, but not other, rulers into a pernicious tradeoff—excluding members of rival ethnic groups and facing a civil war, or including them and facing coup attempts? In “Ethnic Conflict in Africa: Destructive Legacies of Pre-Colonial States” (*IO* 2019), I compiled a new dataset on pre-colonial states in Africa measured at the ethnic group level. Across a battery of statistical tests, I show that the statehood indicator positively correlates with post-independence coups, civil wars, and ethnic party formation.

Pre-colonial statehood helps to explain why *some, but not other*, rulers faced a particularly pressing threat of coup attempts if they shared power with elites from other ethnic groups. Pre-colonial wars and slaving, indirect-rule practices that favored members of ethnic groups from pre-colonial states, and the formation of

distinct ethnic parties to compete in decolonization elections each contributed to severe inter-ethnic frictions in countries with a pre-colonial state. Sharing power did not facilitate credible commitments because of these historically rooted tensions. Consequently, given the threat-enhancing effect, power-sharing arrangements (many of which were promoted by outgoing colonizers) frequently fell prey to coups. Rulers commonly reacted by creating ethnically exclusionary regimes, which elevated prospects for facing rebellions. By contrast, in countries that lacked any pre-colonial states, rulers could share power with the opposition while facing less acute fears of coup attempts. In these cases, commitments tended to be more credible.

Developing the Theoretical Mechanisms

In other articles, I incorporate the commitment and threat-enhancing effects into game-theoretic models. A common argument is that strong coercive threats compel dictators to share power. Scholars propose a variant of this argument to study phenomena such as ethnic conflict, the guardianship dilemma, and European state formation. However, this logic is problematic. I demonstrate formally why strong coercive threats might not induce the ruler to share power, and I apply the theoretical insights to these varied substantive settings.

In several articles, I consider a purely domestic interaction between a ruler and a challenger. If the challenger consists of, for example, members of a numerically large ethnic group, then they pose a strong threat of rebellion if denied access to power at the center. Does sharing power with the strong group mitigate the threat of overthrow? Not necessarily. Threats that are strong on the outside would also be strong on the inside. Members of numerically large groups are also, typically, better positioned to establish contacts within the military and to hold onto power upon seizing it. Thus, their coup threat is also high from the inside, which can deter power sharing (see “The Dictator’s Powersharing Dilemma: Countering Dual Outsider Threats,” *AJPS* 2021). For example, the MPLA regime in Angola endured lengthy civil wars after independence—and hence outsider groups such as UNITA obviously posed a rebellion threat—in part because they feared that sharing power would make them more vulnerable to a coup attempt.

Even if sharing power would neutralize the threat, ruler might nonetheless marginalize the challenger. Sharing power bolsters the coercive capability of the challenger and enables them to accrue more rents. Consequently, the ruler might have to shift so much power in the challenger’s favor to create credible commitments that they would prefer to instead pursue a destructive path. The goal of maximizing lifetime expected consumption is not always compatible with the standard presumption that dictators prioritize survival above all other goals. They might prefer to accrue more rents in the meantime and face a conflict in the future (see “Strategic Power Sharing: Commitment, Capability, and Authoritarian Survival,” *JOP* forthcoming). This provides possible strategic foundations for kleptocratic regimes that narrowly concentrate rents within the ruling group despite creating broad-based grievances that occasionally spur social revolutions.

I also extend my focus to analyze how a strong *external threat* affects this *domestic interaction*. In my aforementioned *AJPS* article, I recover the canonical logic that strong external threats spur the ruler to share power with the domestic challenger only under specific circumstances: if the domestic challenger has low affinity toward the external threat and banding together greatly reduces the threat of outsider takeover. For

example, in post-colonial Malaysia, business elites greatly feared the communist movement and supported the ruling party UMNO, who inherited a strong army from British rule. In fact, by facilitating elite cooperation, I demonstrate how *stronger* external threats can in some circumstances make a regime *more durable*; although usually external threats have the opposite effect.

In “A Theory of External Wars and European Parliaments” (R&R at *IO*), Brenton Kenkel and I theoretically examine the relationship between wars and the development of parliaments. Again contrary to the conventional wisdom, strong war threats can undermine parliament for either of two reasons. First, for elites with non-mobile sources of wealth (e.g., landed nobles), the prospect of destruction from war undercuts their outside option to refuse to fund the ruler. Consequently, the ruler has no incentive to delegate privileges to parliament because they can secure the funds anyway. Second, for elites with mobile sources of wealth (e.g., merchants), a strong external threat might persuade them to move or hide their wealth rather than to fund a hopeless war effort. We illustrate these mechanisms with examples from European history.

Finally, in “Reframing the Guardianship Dilemma: How the Military’s Dual Disloyalty Options Imperil Dictators” (conditionally accepted at *APSR*), I analyze a dictator’s interaction with a military agent, who jointly confront a threat from a mass societal movement. The conventional argument is that strong external threats induce rulers to prioritize competence within the military, as opposed to building a coop-proofed personalist military. The problem with this argument is that members of competent militaries often survive intact even if a regime transition occurs. Consequently, it is precisely *because* they are competent that they might be unwilling to defend the regime. Only external threats that pose an existential threat even to a competent military (e.g., movements that aim for radical redistribution along either economic or ethnic lines) make such agents reliable.

Associated Publications and Working Papers

Title (co-authors)	Publication status
Reframing the Guardianship Dilemma: How the Military’s Dual Disloyalty Options Imperil Dictators	Conditionally accepted at <i>American Political Science Review</i>
Strategic Power Sharing: Commitment, Capability, and Authoritarian Survival	<i>Journal of Politics</i> , forthcoming
The Dictator’s Powersharing Dilemma: Countering Dual Outsider Threats	<i>American Journal of Political Science</i> , 2021
Ethnic Violence in Africa: Destructive Legacies of Pre-Colonial States	<i>International Organization</i> , 2019
Power Sharing and Authoritarian Stability: How Rebel Regimes Solve the Guardianship Dilemma (with Anne Meng)	R&R at <i>American Political Science Review</i>
A Theory of External Wars and European Parliaments (with Brenton Kenkel)	R&R at <i>International Organization</i>
Authoritarian Power Sharing: Concepts, Mechanisms, and Strategies (with Anne Meng and Robert Powell)	In preparation for the <i>Annual Review of Political Science</i>
Autocratization (with Anne Meng)	In progress