

Born This Way: Authoritarian Origins and Regime Survival*

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Abstract

Authoritarian regimes differ widely in their characteristics and durability. Whereas existing typologies emphasize autocratic institutions, we propose categorizing autocracies according to *how they were born*. The founding event of an autocratic regime shapes power-sharing dynamics between the dictator and his ruling coalition, which in turn dictates the likelihood of regime survival. Our typology distinguishes between whether the founding event was armed or unarmed, and the type of actors involved (regime insiders, regime outsiders, or foreign powers). This yields four main founding events for autocracies: (1) coups, (2) rebellions, (3) incumbent consolidations, and (4) foreign handoffs. Using a new global dataset of 360 autocracies from 1946 to 2025, we show that half of all autocracies originate in coups, with the remainder distributed roughly equally among the other three categories. However, incumbent consolidation has been most common in the last two decades. Coup regimes are the most fragile, while those founded by rebellions and foreign-handoffs are the most durable. Regimes also differ substantially in *how* they fail (democratization, coup, or rebellion). Institutions-based frameworks cannot account for these findings, in large part because personalism is a common trait regardless of regime origins. Focusing on regime origins offers distinct theoretical and methodological advantages, providing a clearer foundation for understanding the diversity and durability of authoritarian rule.

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