

Introduction

In the late eighteenth century, American and French revolutionaries established elections as the central institution of modern representative democracy. This reflected a desire to distinguish this form of government from all those before it. Writing in *The Federalist Papers* (No. 63), James Madison stated that the difference between ancient democracies and modern republics was the “total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity, from any share in the latter, and not in the total exclusion of the representatives of the people from the administration of the former” (in Hamilton et al., 1961: 324). The institutionalization of elections was therefore based on the idea that all legitimate authority stems from the consent of those over whom it is exercised. “At the time when representative government was established,” Manin (1997: 91) writes, “medieval tradition and modern natural right theories converged to make the consent and will of the governed the sole source of political legitimacy and obligation.” The true value of elections, then, was their capacity to cultivate the element of choice, adding, for most citizens, genuine meaning to the selection and empowerment of political representatives. Over the next two centuries, the institutionalization of elections increased in tandem with the growth of representative democracy around the world. Today, nearly every country holds elections (Wig et al., 2015). This is indicative of how this institution gradually triumphed over co-optation, examination, lot, and succession to become the pre-eminent method for selecting political authority.

Despite this success, the inconvenient truth is that elections long ago supplanted representative democracy. After they were established in the United States and France, other countries gradually followed suit. This was particularly the case in Latin America, where authoritarian regimes

in Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Peru began holding elections in the first half of the nineteenth century (Przeworski, 2009, 2015). The real problem here was that the dictators in these countries did not hold the same belief about consent that, despite its inconsistent application, proved to be influential in the American and French cases. This is a problem that has evidently endured. Today, while almost all authoritarian regimes hold elections, the principle of consent is neither properly institutionalized nor fully satisfied due to the practice of manipulation and misconduct. A question can therefore be raised about the actual function of this institution, since it is obviously not intended to aid the selection of political authority in the classical sense. While authoritarian elections are certainly façades, dismissing them on this basis alone will not suffice. Indeed, the fact that they exist at all implies that this institution is supposed to contribute to sustaining political survival in some way.

To unravel this paradox, this book accounts for why authoritarian regimes hold elections. In doing so, it sheds new light on the logic of contemporary authoritarianism, including how a nominally democratic institution contributes to the survival of dictators and the political elites surrounding them. The book advances an original theoretical framework for elections in authoritarian regimes: information, legitimation, management, and neopatrimonialism. The first function captures how dictators use elections to ameliorate the dilemma of not knowing whether citizens genuinely support them or support them because they command support. This involves collecting information on one's antagonists and associates within the political system. The second function, legitimation, is pursued at two levels. Nationally, elections are used to feign conformity to established rules of the political system and shared beliefs of citizens. With varying emphasis on participation, the aim is to foster a normative commitment toward the dictator, ruling party, or governing junta. Internationally, elections are used to simulate compliance to democratic norms about the appropriate method of selecting political authority. The standard of appropriateness varies, however, depending on whether liberal or illiberal powers are enforcing this norm. The third function is management. This denotes how dictators employ elections to facilitate clientelism, undertake co-optation, foster solidarity, and/or guarantee succession. The overarching goal is to solicit greater cooperation and exercise finer control among the political elite. The final function is neopatrimonialism. In this context, elections are used to distribute development projects, material goods, and specialized services to citizens in exchange for their votes. The ultimate goal is to buttress the peculiar historical roots

and contemporary bases of state authority. Altogether, the main message to be drawn from this theoretical framework, which is explained in more detail shortly, is that elections are as much an institution of authoritarianism as of democracy.

This book tests this argument using three case studies from Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, elections renew and reinforce neopatrimonial domination by demonstrating the indispensability of the party-state. This prescribes a preeminent role to the dictator Hun Sen, who sits atop the country's traditional patron-client system and casts himself as a "meritorious benefactor" above the fray of competitive politics. In Myanmar (Burma), where the military has been in power in one form or another since 1962, elections have been used to gain legitimation and, to a lesser extent, to undertake management. Despite a history of endogenous crisis and exogenous threats, this institution has been of recurring value to successive dictators and groups of political elites. In Singapore, the People's Action Party has perpetuated two parallel functions for elections: legitimation and management. After more than five decades in power, it is evident that both have been institutionalized in a way that aids the stability and longevity of the ruling party. Overall, these cases demonstrate clearly how there are tangible incentives for authoritarian regimes to hold elections. This windfall becomes all the more significant when juxtaposed against the reasons why they should *not* hold elections.

The Puzzle of Authoritarian Elections

Authoritarian elections have a rich history. They have been held in countries as different and widespread as Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia following World War II; Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia in the 1960s; Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru during the 1970s; East Germany, Hungary, and Yugoslavia throughout the 1980s; Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in the 1990s; and Laos, Malaysia, and Vietnam more recently. A closer examination shows, however, that the "puzzle" of authoritarian elections is omnipresent in the form of five disincentives that should dissuade those in power from sanctioning them.

The most obvious starting point is the ideological abhorrence dictators ostensibly have for this institution. In the classical sense, elections are about choice, yet dictators wish to remain in power, regardless of the choices citizens make. This paradox can be seen in Russia. Since 1999, Vladimir Putin

has undermined existing political institutions, crushed protests against his rule, censored the media, and jailed leading opposition figures. Such actions reflect his need to reconstitute a regime in the wake of the ambiguous legacy left by his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. Yet despite overseeing a transition to authoritarianism, Putin has placed added emphasis on holding and winning elections (Hassner, 2008; Rose et al., 2011). The same can be said for other countries that have recently seen the introduction of authoritarian rule, including Bangladesh, Madagascar, and the Maldives. In all of these cases, those in power have been quick to express a commitment to hold elections (see Marinov and Goemans, 2014). What makes this institution important enough that it must be preserved? How is it that the same dictator who is willing to usurp the constitution is also willing to uphold elections? The implication here is that the benefit of holding elections outweighs any ideological intolerance dictators have for this institution.

Another reason to question why authoritarian regimes hold elections concerns the need to manage risk. There have been numerous examples in recent memory of dictators stealing an election, only to have this action trigger popular protests against their rule (see Tanaka, 2016). The best-case scenario here is that the protests will fail and the dictator will remain in office. However, such protests nevertheless provoke an unwelcome test of intra-elite unity and require dictators to crush the demonstrators through repression—often drawing widespread condemnation. The worst-case scenario is that the protests are so large and intense that they lead to the downfall of the dictator and his political elites. “If the discontent is real,” Dobson (2012: 48) states, “people who would never have been expected to demonstrate or march come out because they feel as though something personal has been stolen from them. Those are the moments that can transform a small opposition of rabble-rousers into a movement for change.” The most prominent example of this was the People Power Revolution in the Philippines. Following years of political instability and poor economic conditions, Ferdinand Marcos attempted to steal the 1986 presidential election. In addition to inciting popular protests, this precipitated a split within the political elite, widespread defections by the armed forces, and a withdrawal of foreign support for the regime. In time, Marcos and his political elites were forced to flee into exile in the United States, allowing the opposition to take power (see Thompson, 1995; Fukuoka, 2015). While this is an extreme example, it is by no means an isolated incident. Dictators have been deposed following stolen elections in Burundi (1993), Serbia (2000), Kenya (2002), Ukraine (2004), and Côte d’Ivoire (2010), to cite just a

few. These cases illustrate the risks elections pose to authoritarian regimes. They raise the question of why they would be sanctioned at all, given the possibility of this outcome.

There is also the inevitable cynicism produced by authoritarian elections. Because they lack genuine freedom and fairness, many citizens and the international community may dismiss the entire exercise as a facade. The sheer absurdity of this exercise was recently seen in Azerbaijan, where the results of the presidential election were accidentally released a full day before voting had even started (Fisher, 2013). In broader terms, some dictators have attempted to overcome this problem by masking their rule with a thin veneer of democracy (on how they maintain “true” support, see Geddes and Zaller, 1989; Rose and Mishler, 2002). A few of the most notable examples include “organic democracy” under Francisco Franco in Spain, “basic democracy” under Ayub Khan in Pakistan, and “guided democracy” under Sukarno in Indonesia. A related issue is the statistical anomalies produced by authoritarian elections. This refers to the situation when the dictator or ruling party claims to have mustered close to 100 percent turnout and support. While these actors will no doubt always have some genuine supporters, the claim that every person imprisoned as part of the Soviet Gulag system would willingly vote for the ruling party that put them there is pure fantasy (see Applebaum, 2003). The core issue, then, concerns the means and ends of authoritarian elections. Regardless of any normative criticism of this phenomenon, it is impossible to separate the strategies dictators and ruling parties employ to secure victory from how those strategies undermine the fulfillment of that same goal. This was evident in Liberia under the True Whig Party, which held power from 1877 to 1980 (a record for any political party). As Greene notes, “Everyone behaved as if the votes and the speeches and the pamphlets mattered. It may have all been a question of cash and printing presses and armed police, but things had to be done with an air. Crudity as far as possible was avoided” (in Meredith, 2005: 545). In effect, the pessimism produced by authoritarian elections in turn produces skepticism about their underlying utility.

The fourth problem with elections in authoritarian regimes is that they occur seemingly without concern for power. This means they are sanctioned regardless of whether a dictator and his supporters are in a relatively weak or a strong position (on this issue more broadly, see Seeberg, 2014). On the one hand, many dictators employ elections during crisis periods, when their position is seemingly in jeopardy. During the prelude to the 2003 Iraq War, for example, Saddam Hussein sanctioned a plebiscite election on the

question of whether he should remain in power for another seven-year term. With invasion imminent, official reports declared all 11,445,638 eligible voters approved of his leadership (Sassoon, 2011). Likewise, Syria's 2011 parliamentary election and 2014 presidential election were both held in the midst of a brutal civil war. This had diminished the reach of the ruling Ba'ath Party, led by Bashar al-Assad, because it no longer controlled large sections of the country. These examples show how ostensibly weak authoritarian regimes use elections in an attempt to overcome poor economic conditions, elite disunity, protests, or war. It implies that this institution has some value that can be drawn on to buttress the survival of those in power.

At the same time, many strong authoritarian regimes also rely on elections. Perhaps the clearest manifestation of this occurred in Germany during the early 1930s (before the onset of totalitarian rule). In his classic history of the Third Reich, William Shirer offers a telling summary of Adolf Hitler's first year in power.

Within twelve months he had overthrown the Weimar Republic, substituted his personal dictatorship for its democracy, destroyed all the political parties but his own, smashed the state government and their parliaments and unified and defederalized the Reich, wiped out the labor unions, stamped out democratic associations of any kind, driven the Jews out of public and professional life, abolished freedom of speech and of the press, stifled the independence of the courts and "co-ordinated" under Nazi rule the political, economic, cultural and social life of an ancient and cultivated people. (1990: 213)

An adjunct to these political maneuvers was the plebiscite election held in November 1933. In this instance, the Nazi Party claimed victory on the grounds that 88.7 percent of voters turned out and 92.1 percent supported them (see Linder and Schultze, 2001). Given their rapid and vast accumulation of power, the actual value of this exercise is unclear. Presumably, strong authoritarian regimes should not need elections because their power is sustained in other ways, and weak authoritarian regimes should not resort to elections because of the added risk they can pose during moments of instability. Today, the practice of elections is at odds with both of these scenarios.

A final disincentive confronting authoritarian regimes is the seemingly unnecessary strain elections place on resources, including energy, money,

and time. One recurring feature of elections in Zimbabwe, for example, is the lavish campaign launches for the ruling Zanu-PF party, led by Robert Mugabe. They typically involve a long speech by the ailing dictator, celebrity appearances, the mobilization of supporters, and the distribution of gifts to tens of thousands of attendees. This is followed by a grueling multistop campaign lasting a few months and reaching every corner of the country. Despite all this effort, however, elections in Zimbabwe are among the most fraudulent in the world (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). So what does the expenditure of such resources accomplish? Admittedly, some dictators manage to avoid this cost altogether by not even bothering to campaign, usually because they are too busy “leading” or “governing” (see Barry, 2011). While this creates a certain sense of inevitability, it also makes elections an apolitical event devoid of national relevance. Such behavior is therefore equally perplexing.

Ultimately, the significance of authoritarian elections is denoted by the fact they take place at all, especially given the aforementioned reasons why they should not be sanctioned. The crux of the issue is one of choice. Dictators must essentially determine whether the capacity to collect information, gain legitimacy, manage political elites, and buttress neopatrimonialism outweighs how ideologically objectionable, politically risky, propagandistically ineffective, strategically superfluous, and unnecessarily demanding elections can be. This book is about such strategic calculations and the effect they have on the survival of authoritarian regimes.

The book speaks to a broader narrative about the persistence of authoritarian rule around the world today. During the third wave of democratization, Huntington (1991: 174) had confidently declared that “elections are not only the life of democracy; they are also the death of dictatorship.” This optimistic view derived from the idea that multiparty elections were anathema to authoritarian regimes, because they encouraged unwanted participation and pluralization. It was also owing to a series of stunning opposition party victories in such places as Chile (1988), Poland (1989), and Nicaragua (1990). Today, such optimism would be misplaced, because most authoritarian regimes have proven to be adept at masking their rule behind democratic artifice. Dictators utilize a strategy of oscillation in which laws are bent, but never broken; the media are censored, but less often owned; the courts can adjudicate, but without neutrality; legislatures exist, but without true independence; opponents are intimidated, but rarely murdered; civil society is circumscribed, but not eliminated; and elections are managed, rather than blatantly stolen. Using this strategy, authoritarian regimes have adapted in

ways that allow them to better account for endogenous and exogenous pressures. This transformation has been so pervasive that, at an institutional level at least, many features of modern authoritarianism can now be reconciled with modern democracy (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2015). Indeed, it has recently been claimed that the staying power of authoritarian regimes has contributed to nothing short of a global “democratic recession” (Diamond, 2015).

The institutionalization of elections in authoritarian regimes has been symptomatic of the insipient decline of democratic regimes; the rate at which countries adopt elections has repeatedly exceeded the rate of true democratization around the world (see Miller, 2015a). In scholarly circles, the traditional view has been that authoritarian elections constitute an involuntary precursor to democratic transition. The problem here is that this assumes elections are institutionally predisposed toward democracy, which speaks to an underlying teleological bias. This book instead assumes that the institutional meaning of elections is far more pliable and responds to the way political power is distributed and organized in a given context. In policymaking circles, elections have traditionally been positioned as a pillar of liberal peace-building missions. Since the early 1990s, key actors in the international community have used this institution to build stable, effective and legitimate states after war. The problem here is the assumption that elections have some functional equivalence across political regimes. Together, these approaches to elections—one theoretical and the other practical—ignore any alternative, nondemocratic perspective. While liberal democratic elections have traditionally been a method for selecting political authority through a free and fair competition for votes, the meaning of authoritarian elections is determined by the ways in which dictatorial designs, elite preferences, historical legacies, international norms, and the needs of citizens combine together. This book is about such alternatives.