

BOOK REVIEW

Anne Meng. *Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xix + 256 pp. List of Abbreviations. List of Tables. List of Figures. References. Index. \$39.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1108792479.

In *Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes*, Anne Meng argues that “autocratic regime institutionalization—the creation of rules and procedures that tie the leader’s hands by empowering other elites—is key to understanding patterns of regime durability in dictatorships” (3). Meng draws on a range of methodological approaches—including formal theory, large-n statistical analysis, and illustrative case studies—to explain why some authoritarian rulers are willing to adopt executive constraints while others are not. She then examines the effects of executive constraints on autocratic stability and leadership succession, finding that leaders who come into power relatively weak are more likely to adopt executive constraints. Leader strength also mediates the effect of regime institutionalization on regime stability: institutionalization positively affects stability for initially weak leaders but does not affect the stability of initially strong leaders. Meng also finds that the existence of constitutional succession procedures and the designation of a successor—two executive constraints that shift power from leaders to other elites—are associated with peaceful transitions.

The book is comprised of eight chapters. After an introduction which identifies the key puzzle, situates the study within the broader literature, and summarizes the author’s approach and argument, Chapter Two presents a formal model of the conditions under which autocratic leaders institutionalize. Chapter Three compares Cameroon (a highly institutionalized regime) and Côte d’Ivoire (a weakly institutionalized regime), tracing these differences to the initial strength of their founding leaders. The next chapter discusses the concept and measurement of regime institutionalization. Meng defines regime institutionalization “as the creation of rules and procedures that structure the distribution of power and resources within the ruling coalition” (93). Specific indicators of regime institutionalization include succession procedures, term limits, and the appointment of elites to key positions such as vice president/prime minister and defense minister. Chapter Five seeks to explain

variations in regime institutionalization, identifying leader strength as a key explanatory factor. The following two chapters then use regime institutionalization as the independent variable to explain autocratic stability and leadership succession. The concluding chapter highlights the study's empirical and theoretical contributions.

The book speaks to the field of African politics in several ways. While scholars of African politics have generally emphasized “big man” politics and personal rule and discounted the importance of formal institutions such as constitutions, Meng argues that formal institutions matter, now as well as in the past. She also highlights variation in institutionalization in authoritarian states. Some regimes, such as Mobutu's Zaire, were weakly institutionalized, while others, such as Ahidjo's Cameroon, had institutions that constrain executive power. For Meng, the most effective constraints empower specific individuals, since these individuals then have self-interested reasons to support the existing regime. Meng also offers a counter-narrative to the conventional framing of political developments in Africa in the 1990s. For Meng, the “real story of Africa in the 1990s was not democratization; it was institutionalization” (15). She argues that by institutionalizing, autocratic leaders were able to increase regime stability.

Meng criticizes previous studies for focusing on the existence of institutions like parties and legislatures rather than on the content of these institutions. Her approach to coding executive constraints, however, similarly relies on a simple measure of whether certain institutions such as succession policies and term limits exist. Some elements of her argument align with conventional perspectives; the appointment of elites to powerful positions such as vice president and defense minister can be seen as a form of patrimonial politics in which leaders buy loyalty by offering access to power and resources. Meng does, though, complement her appointment measure with an additional measure of whether the person appointed to the post was the same as the previous year, which provides a way of assessing whether appointees can establish power independently from the leader. The case studies draw on some work by African scholars, but the book is primarily situated within the general political science literature. Its interest to Africanists outside of the field of political science may be somewhat limited. Finally, Meng focuses on elites and the conditions under which executives tie their own hands. There is little attention to the effects of these decisions on ordinary Africans.

In summary, the book contributes to a growing literature on comparative authoritarianism. It calls into question two dominant narratives—that formal institutions have not mattered in Africa and that the 1990s was a period of democratization—and makes important empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of African politics.

Melinda J. Adams 

*James Madison University
Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA
adams2mj@jmu.edu*

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