

What Explains the Durability of One-Party Dictatorships: Internal versus External Variables?

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Recent works on various aspects of the Chinese Communist Party have shed important light on the internal politics and on policy implementation of the largest one-party regime in the world, which has complemented nicely the theoretical literature on one-party dictatorships (Svolik 2012; Svolik 2009; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Geddes 1999). However, recent findings about internal institutions of the CCP regime do not necessarily explain the biggest outcome of interest, the longevity of CCP rule. Rather, another wave of rigorous cross national research is needed to assess whether institutional features embedded in one-party regimes or external conditions are more important for the longevity of these regimes. By external conditions, I mean macro-historical variables that are largely exogenous to contemporary institutional features of the single-party states. Three compelling external conditions include the party's control over armed forces in the immediately aftermath of regime formation, the degree of social reformatting in the immediate aftermath of regime formation, and medium term balance of payment. Future comparative research may seek to test whether these variables and additional external conditions impacted the longevity of one-party states.

In Geddes' (1999) seminal paper on different types of authoritarian regimes, she points out that 50% of one-party authoritarian regimes that had existed in 1946 still survived in 1998, a much higher ratio than for monarchies or military regimes. Because authoritarian parties provided club goods to the various factions, upholding these regimes still presented a better option than splitting them for the elite. Svolik's works extended and formalized this insight by specifying a whole host of incentives embedded in the ruling party that would make regime longevity more likely, from longer time horizon of officials to creating sunk costs for party members to creating more credible power sharing arrangements (Svolik 2012). The literature

on one-party states also dovetails nicely with the rich literature on authoritarian legislatures (Svolik and Boix 2007; Gandhi 2008). This literature argues that because authoritarian legislatures provide credibility to power or rent sharing arrangements between the dictator and her supporters, they help lengthen regime longevity.

Because scholars of China study the largest living one-party state in the world, it is natural that China scholars begin to link their own works on various aspects of the Chinese Communist Party to the burgeoning literature on single-party regimes and authoritarian legislatures. First and foremost, a large scholarship shows that the party-instituted cadre evaluation system motivated local officials, especially those in lower tiers of government, to engage in yard-stick competition, which produced greater growth for China, presumably beneficial to the regime (Landry et al. 2017; Jia et al. 2014; Landry 2008; Li and Zhou 2005; Chen et al. 2005; Edin 2003). The burgeoning literature on censorship and internet control strongly suggests that the party deploys vast resources and technical know-how to promote specific objectives to enhance legitimacy and to prevent collective action (King et al. 2013; King et al. 2017).

Recent works on the National People's Congress clearly dovetail nicely with the literature on authoritarian legislatures (Lu et al. 2017; Truex 2016; Manion 2016). Beyond providing a credible arena for power sharing, the research on the National People's Congress finds that quasi representative bodies may serve two additional functions, providing credible information on societal demands (Truex 2016) and providing a low-cost arena for elite disputes (Lu et al. 2017). Because the NPC generally is found to serve regime-strengthening ends, the literature on the NPC implicitly addresses the large question of regime longevity.

Even the literature on factionalism can be interpreted as an informal mechanism embedded in the formal party structure which made power sharing more credible (Nathan and Tsai 1995; Nathan 1973). If senior officials at the highest level knew that they each had a say in promoting some junior officials because of the assumption of factional balance, they had longer time horizon and credible expectation of future payoffs as their followers succeeded them in high level offices (Nathan 2003). Empirically, factional ties with past and present secretary

generals, presumably the heads of the major factions, seem to have a robust effect on promotion outcomes for ministerial level officials (Meyer et al. 2016; Shih et al. 2012).

Despite the torrent of China literature on the institutional advantages embedded in the regime, which are implicitly or explicitly linked to the larger question of regime durability, a skeptical view is warranted. First and foremost, because China scholars have an N of one, it is difficult to make any causal inference. That is, as much as institutions within the party or created by the party generated short term benefits to the regime in terms of promoting capable cadres, providing information to the top leadership, and enhancing elite unity, they may not be the only or even the main drivers of regime durability. Instead, factors external to the party state, such as major shocks to institutions and society immediately prior to or after regime formation and global trade shocks may be the main drivers.

The periods around regime formation were often critical junctures for one-party states because of the consolidation of two sets of relationships in those periods--the relationship between armed forces which upheld these regimes and the ruling parties, and, second, the relationship between the ruling parties and pre-existing social structure. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was a crucial case to illustrate the importance of these factors. Internally, the GDR had similar Leninist institutions as China and the most extensive and technologically sophisticated monitoring capacity over its citizens in the 1970s and the 1980s. The Stasi employed close to a hundred thousand professional agents armed with hidden cameras to follow thousands of potential and known dissidents on a daily basis¹ Nothing was left to chance. Yet, because it was a puppet state formed by the invading Soviet Army, it relied mainly on the Soviet military for its defense for most of its existence. When the Soviets pulled out, the leadership got cold feet about shooting protestors, and the protests began to cascade out of control (Kuran 1991). Furthermore, although the GDR, following its Soviet elder brother, systematically eradicated rival social organizations, especially after the erection of the Berlin Wall, the regime existed adjacent to a pluralistic society from its inception, West Germany. As a result, there were frequent exchanges even after the erection of a fortified border between

¹ Author's visit to the Stasi Museum, Berlin 7/12/2017

the two Germanys, especially commercial and religious exchanges. Ultimately, when the protests cascaded beyond control, the moderate GDR leadership easily found a credible ally outside of the regime to trump the hardliners, the West German government (Sarotte 2014).

In sharp contrast to the GDR, regime-military relationship and state-society relationship hardened in favor of regime longevity in the 1950s in China. First, because after the Long March, the CCP achieved victory over the KMT mostly by its own effort, it had a massive fighting force of its own creation by 1949. Except during periods of severe internal splits within the party, the military was completely at the disposal of the party's top leadership. Also, the party used its control over the military to create "increasing returns" in its state-society relationship (Pierson 2000). The party spent much of the 1950s systematically destroying or driving underground existing social organizations and structures, using its overwhelming advantage in coercive force (Dikötter 2013).

To be sure, religious cults and criminal syndicates still persisted into the PRC period, but they no longer represented extensive organizations outside of the party's control that party insiders could ally with during internal political struggles. The absence of autonomous social forces was important for regime longevity because even during times of intense internal conflicts, such as during the Cultural Revolution or in 2012, regime insiders did not have the option of mobilizing autonomous and organized social forces as a way to trump rivals. As Przeworski (1991) points out, such alliances often spelled the end of authoritarian regimes. Today, the interaction between the thin autonomous social organizations and increasing capacity to monitor and police society provides a powerful combination to enhance regime longevity in China.

Finally, the case of the Soviet Union illustrated the importance of balance of payment in regime longevity. In the immediate aftermath of the oil crisis in the late 1970s, the best analysis in the US still predicted positive balance of payments in the Soviet Union in the billions of dollars per year through the 1980s (Grossman and Solberg 1983). Yet, by 1985, oil prices have fallen to 1/5 of its 1979 level, and the Soviet Union began to run persistent current account deficits, which required increasingly large loans from capitalist states. These large

deficits likely drove Gorbachev to stop the flow of subsidized commodities and Soviet guaranteed hard-currency credit to the Eastern Bloc states (Sebestyen 2009). Furthermore, sizable balance of payment deficits and increasingly heavy debt to the capitalist states likely informed Gorbachev's decision in the late 1980s to not use military force against rebelling Eastern Bloc countries. If tanks had rolled into Budapest again, Western creditors likely would have cut off credit to the Soviet Union, bankrupting the regime overnight. The exact mechanism that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union will be debated for years to come, but if the regime had maintained a sizable balance of payment surplus through the 1980s, the Soviet Empire likely would have survived well into the 1990s. China, of course, continues to be in a strong position on this score because it continues to run large current account surpluses. However, in recent years, its trade surplus as a share of GDP has dropped to a negligible level, and China faced a couple episodes of massive capital account outflows that erased nearly 1 trillion dollars from its foreign exchange reserves. Thus, China's strong balance of payment may not persist.

In sum, despite our increasing knowledge of the short-term benefits of the internal institutions of the CCP regime, these internal variables likely are most useful in predicting outcomes within the regime, such as promotions, purges, and regional distribution of growth, rent-seeking, and welfare provision. To tackle the question of regime longevity, external conditions such as initial control over the military and over society, as well as the balance of payment, may play an equal if not larger causal role. Hopefully, future cross national works can tackle this speculation in a rigorous manner.

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