RULING NETWORKS AND INTRA-REGIME TRANSITIONS

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Authoritarian regimes have most often been classified according to their institutional features and measured using minimalist criteria. While the relevance of authoritarian institutions is well established, typologies rooted in these institutions often fail to capture important features of regimes. Conceptualizing authoritarian regimes as ruling networks and creating typologies that are rooted in the topologies of these networks, centrality of leaders and other elites and the domains in which the most central actors reside may help better capture intra-regime dynamics and inter-regime differences. Rather than viewing authoritarian states ruled by networks that deviate from institutional mappings as exceptions, I argue that this conceptualization is broadly relevant (Svolik 2012). The importance of authoritarian networks in shaping regime support and political behavior within states, particularly in the Middle East, has been emphasized by scholars, but such analyses generally focus on the relationship between regime actors and peripheral notables (Heydemann 2004; Haddad 2011; Kononenko and Moshes 2011; Mazur 2021).

Conceptualizing authoritarian regimes as ruling networks will provide a dynamic framework amenable to the creation of measures that better capture the locus, distribution and consolidation of power in authoritarian regimes.

This work extends the intuitions of scholars who have examined elite networks in the Middle East, and authoritarian politics more broadly, by arguing that further work should be done to categorize authoritarian regimes according to the relevant features of their networks in order to better understand regimes and the relative strength of leaders within them. It is my contention that conceptualizing authoritarian regimes as ruling networks will provide a dynamic framework amenable to the creation of measures that better capture the locus, distribution and consolidation of power in authoritarian regimes. Beyond helping us improve upon and add to our typologies and measures associated with authoritarian regimes, a network-based conceptualization will allow researchers to capture important changes that occur within regimes, even when the identities of those in power and the institutional frame-

work of the state are unchanged. Such transformations can have a profound influence on both political stability and the policies produced by the state.

After a brief discussion of the conceptualization of authoritarian regimes, this piece will explore the relative usefulness of a network-based approach in describing the changes that occurred within Syria due to the hereditary succession of Bashar Al-Assad. While traditional measures that rely on institutional features do not capture the fundamental transformations that occurred in Syria due to Bashar Al-Assad's succession, the ruling network was altered drastically. This analysis highlights the potential usefulness of a network-based approach to authoritarian regime classification, but it does not aim to provide an exhaustive discussion of how such classifications should be constructed.

From Coalitions to Networks

The authoritarian regime-type classifications and conceptualizations that currently dominate the literature often fail to capture the heterogeneity in authoritarian systems where institutionalized hierarchies do not match the patterns of observed authority (Svolik 2012). In such contexts, rather than the institutions of the state delineating the boundaries of agency among the powerful within the regime, they obfuscate the latent networks that shape the regime's authority structure. Measurements that capture typologies rooted in the institutions of the state or ruling coalitions, whether they be associated with parties, military juntas or some other group, may not capture the essential features of the regime. To better understand the distribution of power, internal threats to leaders and where leaders may allocate the resources of the state, I propose moving beyond a coalitional or institutional logic to a network-based approach to conceptualize these regimes. Rather than advocating for one particular broad typology, this short piece presents the argument for the development of a flexible set of typologies that may better characterize the salient features of authoritarian regimes.

Perhaps the most influential authoritarian typology is that offered by Barbara Geddes, which classifies authoritarian systems as monarchical, military, party, personalistic and hybrid regimes (Geddes 1999; Geddes et al. 2012). Each of these regime types carries with it different sets of implicit institutional constraints placed on leaders, both with regard to whom leaders answer to and the degree to which these leaders cede power to elites within institutions that act as credible commitment mechanisms (Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2008). Many of the other typologies commonly utilized by political scientists establish different categories, measure categories differently or incorporate electoral openness within their framework, yet the underlying premises and classification systems resemble one another (Cheibub et al. 2010, Wahman et al. 2013).

There are two potential issues associated with a reliance on such typologies that were aptly discussed by Milan Svolik (2012). First, the core features of the authoritarian regime types that characterize such schemes are dimensions of a broad set of regimes and can often be found simultaneously in the same regime. Second, the institutions that are often used to build such typologies do not provide an accurate picture of the distribution of power within the state. While Svolik (2012: 19-45) offers his own multidimensional conceptual framework and measurement strategy that incorporates the characteristics of leadership entry and political affiliation, my

current work hopes to provide a lens that builds on his crucial intervention into this literature.

The characteristics of an authoritarian regime can also be described using the terminology of selectorate theory (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2011). In its simplest form, selectorate theory provides a parsimonious lens into how the size of a winning coalition, the group of individuals necessary to keep a leader in power, and the selectorate, the group of people who can play a role in determining who may take power, shape the decisions made by leaders. While selectorate theory provides insight into how the structure of the regime may influence policy, and more recent applications have added nuance to the basic model (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2017), it does not provide a framework for the analysis of transitions in power or intra-regime dynamics. Moreover, the line between members of the winning coalition and the genuine selectorate is often blurry and fluid. Changes in the makeup of whom among the elites is favored and afforded greater say in policy making could influence the distribution and nature of the benefits afforded to regime insiders.

A conceptualization of authoritarian regimes as ruling elite networks provides a flexible framework that allows us to capture both inter- and intra-regime differences and changes more accurately. In particular, the network centrality of leaders and elites, the structure of regime elite networks and the domains in which centrally located elites operate may be particularly valuable to understanding political dynamics in authoritarian settings. A network-based dynamic framework for understanding authoritarian regimes is amenable to the creation of parsimonious qualitative typologies by examining the domains in which the regime's powerful elites operate, yet it can also capture changes that traditional typologies generally do not. For example, leadership changes that seemingly operate within the same institutional framework often do not produce changes in how regime types are coded. However, the succession of a new leader is a potentially destabilizing event in large part due to the differences in the new leader's relationship with regime elites. Any change in leadership will necessarily change the structure of the ruling network and the centrality of the leader within such a network. Such changes can be drastic or minor, but a change in leadership produces changes to the ruling network that can have potentially large consequences on the stability of—and policies produced by—the regime.

In many ways, conceptualizing authoritarian regimes as networks preserves the important features of the typologies that have traditionally been used and consolidates various paradigms into one framework. Authoritarian regime classifications that measure regime types using the characteristics of leaders implicitly utilize networks to understand regimes. Measures of a leader's consolidation of power do the same when attempting to understand the strength of leaders relative to elites within their regimes. Moreover, a ruling networks strategy does not eschew the importance of institutions as either relevant features of the political landscape or potentially important components of measures of regime types. Rather, it extends the logic of existing conceptualizations to account for both a broader set of contexts and salient features of authoritarian regimes.

From Assad to Assad

One might expect little to change upon the ascent of a hand-picked hereditary successor,

such as Bashar Al-Assad, to the presidency in a stable autocratic regime. And, if we were to rely on traditional typologies, we would see little change in such situations. Geddes' authoritarian regime typology codes Syria as a party-personal-military dictatorship both before and after Hafez Al-Assad's death (Geddes et al. 2012). For the democracy-dictatorship index, the transition in power in Syria did not result in any coding changes; Syria remained a military regime. Yet, the changes that occurred in Syria that were seemingly a result of the succession were profound. This section provides a brief examination of how the change in leadership in Syria affected the ruling network, and how this, in turn, produced important changes to the policies produced by the regime.

While the focus of this brief discussion is the succession of Bashar Al-Assad, it is Hafez Al-Assad's 1970 coup d'état that perhaps most poignantly captures the threat posed by elites forming powerful networks within regimes. The coup that brought about Assad rule in Syria was made possible by Hafez Al-Assad's gradual cultivation of strong ties with lower-level officers in the military. Absent the development of such a network, he would not have found himself in a position to challenge Salah Jadid and the many Ba'ath Party elites who stood behind him. His ability to seize power was fundamentally associated with the structure of the ruling network allowing him to marshal the human resources needed to overthrow Jadid.

Hafez Al-Assad's reign was eventually characterized by stable autocratic rule, yet it would take approximately a decade and a half for him to consolidate power. Although Hafez faced minor internal challenges in the immediate aftermath of his coup, and a protracted external challenge from the Muslim brotherhood, it was his brother, Rifaat, who would present the most dangerous threat to his rule after Hafez became ill in 1983. Rifaat's control over the Defense Companies, an elite force meant to check any threat that might emanate from the military, his relationship with military officers and his connections to certain well-positioned party elites made him a formidable opponent to Hafez. Nevertheless, Rifaat's attempted coup was rebuffed by Hafez as he regained strength and was able to win back control over the military, yet the aftermath of the challenge did not simply preserve the status quo. Rather than punishing Rifaat in the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, Hafez would elevate him to vice president while weakening his network within the party's regional command and restructuring the coercive apparatus of the state before exiling him (Drysdale 1985).

It is only in the aftermath of Rifaat's failed coup attempt and the weakening of potentially powerful networks controlled by elites that Hafez's regime could be characterized as a stable autocracy. The regime elite network that dominated Syrian politics was fractured and there was no viable competitor to Assad. By restructuring the ruling network, Hafez was able to increase both his centrality within the regime and reduce the centrality of his nearest possible competitor.

This would produce the most stable period in Syria's regime elite landscape. This stability is perhaps exemplified by the longevity of the cabinets formed after Rifaat's failed coup. *Figure 1* presents the government duration and survival rate of cabinets formed in Syria from 1966 to 2020. Hafez Al-Assad's last three cabinets lasted 937, 1702, and 2814 days.[1] These are the three longest lasting cabinets in Syria's short history. Although the upper echelon of the

1. For the purposes of this analysis, any change in the composition of the cabinet is coded as a new cabinet.

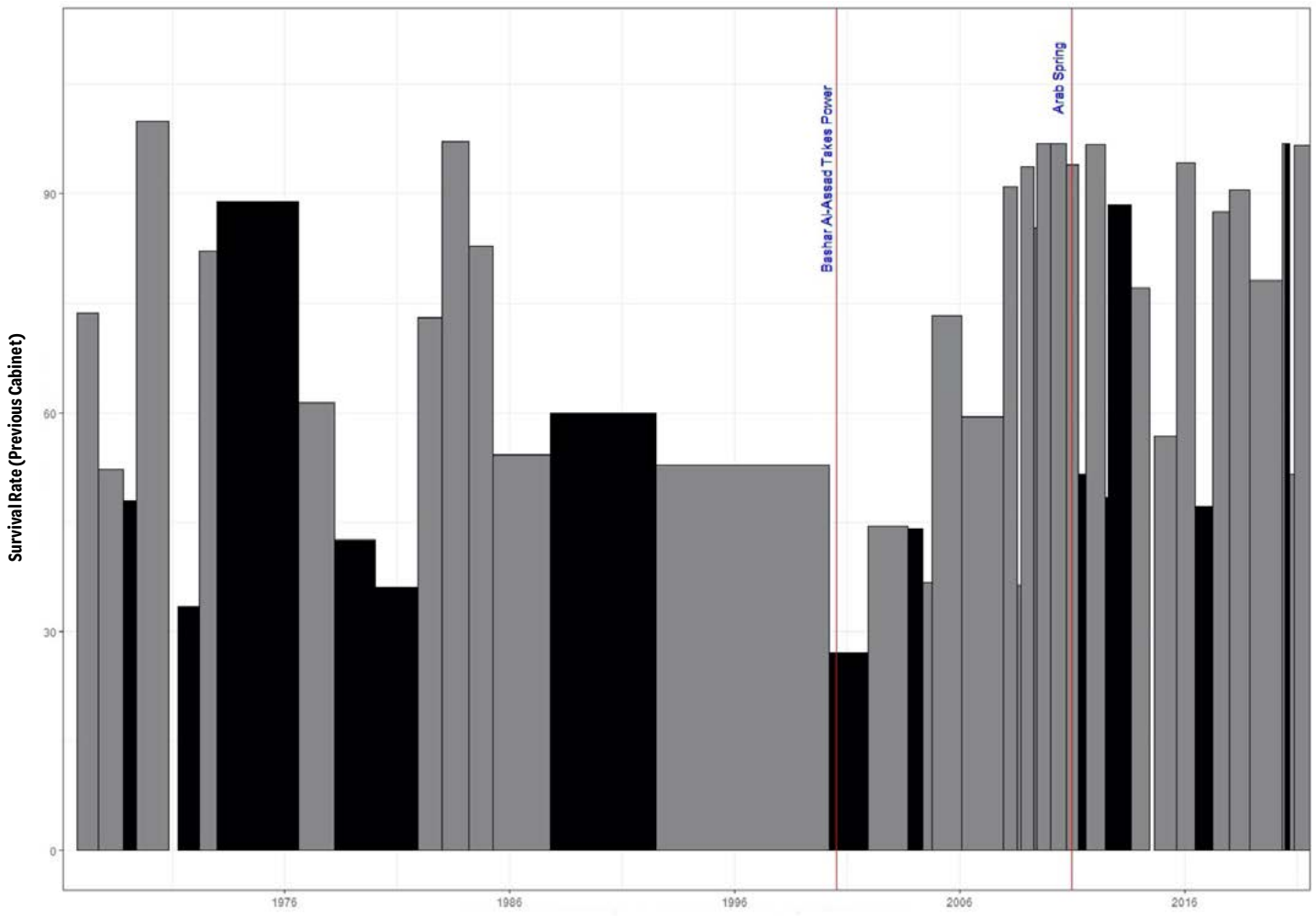

Figure 1: Syrian Cabinet Duration and Survival Rate (1966-2020).

bureaucratic elites was relatively stable during this period of time, they persisted in a weakened and fractured state.

Much of this period was also characterized by stability in both the trajectory of economic policy and the identities of economic elites. While Hafez's reign was uncompromising and politically repressive, it fostered an environment with relatively predictable rules for operating small scale economic enterprises that would not threaten the regime. Corruption was pervasive, but it was of a nature that allowed room for the petit bourgeoisie to maneuver (Hinnebusch 1993; Hinnebusch 1995). It was in the interest of the regime insiders and military officers who took bribes that these businesses persist. As such, this period was characterized to a large extent by a broad state/military bourgeoisie that benefited from constrained private markets (Haddad 2011). Syria's relatively closed socialist economy did open up gradually in the 1990s due to the need to stimulate economic growth; nevertheless, its economy remained heavily restricted and controlled.

Bashar Al-Assad was not initially groomed to be president, and he was more closely tied to the cosmopolitan urban regime elites than those who operated in the political and coercive spheres. Yet, upon the death of his brother, Bassel, he was quickly escorted up the ladder of

Syria's military and political hierarchy. Moreover, Bashar was increasingly taking on a greater role in policy making and authority over crucial issues in the late 1990s, reducing the power of other regime elites (Bronson 2000). This was undoubtedly to the consternation of some regime elites who may have perceived themselves to be more capable than Bashar and suitable successors (Bronson 2000; Drysdale 1985). In these years, a more reclusive and ailing Hafez worked to shape a regime that would be more likely to support Bashar's succession.

While the weakness of regime elites may be associated to some extent with the strength of the ruler, it is the capacity of potential competitors to challenge chosen successors after the death of the leader that is perhaps most relevant in evaluating the likelihood that power will be transferred to a leader's preferred heir. Many strong autocrats have failed to pass on their rule to a chosen successor, and the Syrian context was not necessarily favorable to hereditary succession (Brownlee 2007). Nevertheless, Bashar was able to successfully take power upon his father's death due, in large part, to elite fragmentation.

Rather than continuity, Bashar Al-Assad's ascent to the presidency led to rapid and meaningful changes to Syria's political landscape. The cabinet formed in 2000, months before Hafez would pass away, produced greater turnover than any new cabinet formed after 1966, including the government formed after Hafez Al-Assad's 1970 coup (*Figure 1*). The most powerful elites would remain in their positions for some time—perhaps due to fears that they might try to usurp power if directly targeted—yet their networks would be disrupted immediately. During the early years of the regime, Vice President Abdelhalim Khaddam, a longtime presence in the Syrian political landscape and supporter of Hafez, would grumble most loudly about the direction of the regime and establish himself as the primary potential competitor to Bashar. The tumultuous first five years of Bashar's reign are often considered to be a period where Bashar Al-Assad was attempting to consolidate power, and it was in 2005 that he was able to reign in or eliminate potential threats, including Khaddam.

Yet, even after 2005, the regime was constantly in flux, never settling into a stable political elite network. The regime's bureaucratic networks and political party were destabilized in an effort to strengthen Bashar's position, and members of Hafez's regime were gradually replaced by individuals with weaker ties to other elites and strong ties to those close to Bashar. More importantly, his regime rapidly liberalized Syria's economy in a manner that shifted the locus of power away from political/military actors to cronies in the private sector. Syria's liberalization process produced an economic order that was hierarchically structured with Rami Makhlouf, the president's cousin, and eventually his company, Cham Holdings, at the top.[2] This liberalization process allowed the president to strengthen the position of close allies who could balance against the power of entrenched political and military elites. Although other companies and elites thrived in this environment, the implicit approval of Makhlouf and Cham Holdings was required in order for larger enterprises to be formed. What emerged was a liberalization process that organized the private sphere hierarchically under the stewardship of Makhlouf, and this effectively reshaped the nature of the relationship between private sector actors and political/military regime elites. Ultimately, this

2. It should be noted that Makhlouf also possessed strong ties to individuals in the security apparatus.

produced a counterbalance to the entrenched political elites operating within the party and the government.

Many of the regime's elites resisted the liberalization process early on. While contrasting policy preferences were expressed by holdovers from Hafez's government and new entrants into the higher echelons of the bureaucracies, these expressed preferences were not necessarily truthful representations of their beliefs. For example, Abdelhalim Khaddam had staked out a pro-liberalization position prior to Bashar's presidency (Barout 2011). After Bashar took power and instituted a number of policies opening up various industries, Khaddam became one of the more vocal opponents of liberalization. This shift appears to be due primarily to political considerations.

Traditional conceptualizations of authoritarian regimes and the consolidation of a leader's power would not capture the changes that occurred within the Syrian regime. How might a network-based conceptualization of the regime help explain the changes that occurred within Syria? First, it was Hafez's coup-proofing via the fracturing of elite networks that allowed Bashar to take power. Second, the transition from Hafez to Bashar took the regime from a leader with a relatively high degree of network centrality within the political, bureaucratic and coercive networks of the regime to a leader who was relatively peripheral. Finally, Bashar's close ties to kin and elites operating in the private sphere and weak ties to political networks incentivized shifting the locus of power away from party elites and toward those operating in the private sphere and security apparatus. This produced meaningful political and policy changes similar in magnitude to those which might be experienced in a transition from a large to small winning coalition or party-centered to military-centered authoritarian regime.

Conclusion

In many regards, the Syrian regime and Bashar's succession within it are exceptional, yet the distribution of power within authoritarian regimes is often unconstrained by institutional arrangements (Svolik 2012). As such, conceptualizing regimes as networks may help us better understand the characteristic features of a broad set of regimes rather than just those with relatively strong institutions. This does not imply that institutions do not matter. They play an important role in shaping networks, can produce mechanisms for leaders to credibly commit to power sharing and may help us understand the latent network structures of regimes. However, beginning with a conceptualization of regimes as ruling networks may provide a more flexible approach that is capable of capturing the relevant features of a broader set of authoritarian regimes within a unified and logically coherent framework. ●

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