Manuscript Overview

Building a Dictatorship:
Denis Sassou Nguesso, the Republic of Congo,
and Africa's Third Wave of Democracy

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The Third Wave of Democracy reached Africa in January 1989. Five years later, with the Cold War over and food prices soaring, Africa's autocrats bowed to popular demands for reform. Some fell, others survived. But virtually all were subjected to nominally democratic institutions: term limits, parliaments, and regular multiparty elections. In some countries, these democratic institutions took hold. Elections grew more competitive, losers respected the will of voters, and equitable economic growth produced a middle class. But elsewhere – places like Angola, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Togo – elections remain a sham, and ruling families grow wealthy while their citizens remain the world's poorest. There are, increasingly, two Africas: one democratic, the other autocratic.

Scholars routinely ask some variant of the question: Why do autocrats hold regular elections? in Sub-Saharan Africa, the answer is historical. Africa's *ancien régimes* conceded nominally democratic institutions during the Third Wave of Democracy. These institutions have persisted, for institutions are difficult to change, especially when required by the international community in exchange for economic aid, investment, and debt relief. Nominally democratic institutions pose new challenges to Africa's autocrats. Most obviously, they lack access to the single party regimes that sustained their predecessors. Moreover, regular elections create "focal moments" for popular protest, when citizens are engaged, discontent is palpable, and opposition leaders coalesce frustration into mass protest. Africa's autocrats confront these new challenges with new constraints. When international creditors are willing to sanction human rights violations, repression is more costly, and citizens are more willing to protest. Accordingly, between 1986 and 2000, the number of autocracies in Africa fell from 45 to 30. Since then, however, the rate of democratization has slowed to a trickle.

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This book explores how Africa's autocrats are learning to survive *despite* the nominally democratic institutions they confront and the international pressure that has made outright repression more costly. The book's central argument is that autocratic survival is fundamentally about manipulating beliefs: of the elites whose compliance must be induced, of the citizens whose acquiescence must be elicited, and of the international community that must be made to abandon pressures to reform.

Understanding how Africa's autocrats aim to manipulate the beliefs of these stakeholders requires a range of empirical methods and data sources. To understand the challenges and constraints confronted by Africa's post-Cold War autocrats, I employ a day-level records of protest and repression across the continent since 1989. To understand domestic politics – the individuals who comprise the regime, the excluded elites who hope to join or depose it, and the frustrated citizens who struggle against it – I focus on the Republic of Congo, ruled by President Denis Sassou Nguesso for all but five years since 1979. I employ a series of datasets that follow Congo's 1,500 leading political figures, 129 political parties, local and national elections, and 15,000 appointments to the internal security apparatus. To understand influence campaigns in Western capitals and outward facing propaganda apparatuses, I again broaden my focus to include several of Africa's most durable autocrats.

An annotated table of contents appears below.

Annotated Table of Contents

Part I. Foundations

Chapter 1. Autocrats, Political Institutions, and the Third Wave of Democracy
The manuscript's introductory chapter introduces the argument and situates the project in the broader study of autocratic politics.

Chapter 2. The New Strategic Landscape
This chapter sketches the new strategic landscape that Africa's post-Cold War autocrats confront. I identify four key components. First, regular elections constitute focal moments for collective action. I show that the daily rate of protest is three to five times higher during the 15 days before and after election day than any other time of year, regardless of the economic and political conditions under which the election occurs. Second, I show that during periods of financial leverage by international donors, Africa's autocrats have been less likely to repress citizens. Third, during these same periods of financial leverage, citizens have been more likely to protest. Finally, I show that these protests have consequences. As the rate of military coups has declined, popular protests have emerged as a chief threat to Africa's autocrats. When Africa's autocrats have lost power, their collapse has been preceded by sustained protests.

Empirically, this chapter draws on a novel, day-level dataset of Africa's post-Cold War autocracies.

Chapter 3. The Rise, Decline, and Rise of Denis Sassou Nguesso

Congo's history, like that of most autocracies, has been written by the victors. This chapter provides context for the subsequent chapters by documenting Sassou Nguesso's rise to power in 1979, his removal in 1992, his role in provoking the 1997 civil war that ended with his return to power, and the key events since. This chapter also situates Denis Sassou Nguesso and the Republic of Congo in the set of Africa's post-Cold War autocrats. Congo's history, of course, is distinctive, but its broad contours are similar to those in Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and Togo, among others.

Empirically, this chapter is based on archival research and key informant interviews in Congo and France, as well as the day-level dataset of Africa's post-Cold War autocracies introduced in Chapter 2.

Part II. Fostering Elite Compliance

Since World War II, nearly 70% of autocrats removed by non-constitutional means – *coups d'état* and assassinations – have fallen to regime insiders: the elites to whom they delegate authority.[1] Africa's post-Cold War autocrats must prevent elite conspiracies without the easy recourse to violence enjoyed by their predecessors. They must also prevent frustrated elites from defecting to the opposition during moments of crisis, which elections, however flawed, render more common. Part II features two chapters that explore Sassou Nguesso's efforts to foster elite compliance.

Chapter 4. Appointment, Shuffling, and the Politics of Predictability

How do autocrats recruit for their regimes' most sensitive positions? And once appointed, how do autocrats decide whether to reappoint them? I argue that Africa's post-Cold War autocrats induce elite compliance by practicing a "politics of predictability." This entails constructing a political in-group, to which regime appointments are almost exclusively granted. This in-group may be based on ethnicity, but it need not be, and autocrats have powerful incentives to reduce its size as their domestic positions strengthen. This reduction in size often entails marginalizing the "seizure group": the set of elites who helped bring the autocrat to power.[2] I identify two ways to accomplish this: exploiting social cleavages within the seizure group and cultivating alternative sources of legitimacy, which make retribution by marginalized members of the seizure group costly. The complement to a predictable appointment policy is a predictable reappointment policy. I argue that the elite shuffle – in which appointees are frequently and arbitrarily removed from the coalition – is a sign of autocratic weakness: of weak monitoring technologies, which prevent the autocrat from rewarding compliance with reappointment and punishing non-compliance with termination.

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[1]Svolik (2012).

[2]The term is from Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018). Haber (2006) called it the "launching group."

Empirically, this chapter draws on a dataset that follows Congo's 1,500 leading political elites – as well as the members of his seizure group – each year since Sassou Nguesso reclaimed power in 1997. The dataset also records public criticism of the regime, as reported in Brazzaville's independent newspapers.

Chapter 5. Guarding the Guardians, the Politics of Stigma, and Social Monitoring

Chapter 4 focused on inducing elite compliance; Chapter 5 focuses on discouraging elite non-compliance. I distinguish between two forms of non-compliance: private, which encompasses shirking and internal conspiracies, and public, which occurs when elites defect to the population during disputed elections or other moments of crisis.[3] Autocrats discourage these forms of non-compliance in different ways. To discourage private non-compliance, this chapter documents the existence of an extensive parallel government, in which appointees with overlapping responsibilities compete for the autocrat's favor.[4] The parallel government's key feature, however, is the prevalence of social cleavages between paired elites, which diminish the likelihood of collusion. To discourage public non-compliance, autocrats compel elites to engage in behavior that undermines their political careers in a post-regime, more democratic future. I refer to this as political stigma, and, in Central Africa, one common source is membership in the autocrat's freemasonry lodge, an institution with no policymaking authority, no pretense to public service, and oaths of personal loyalty to the autocrat.[5]

Empirically, this chapter draws on the elite-year dataset introduced in Chapter 4, as well as a survey experiment that documents the stigma associated with membership in Sassou Nguesso's freemasonry lodge.

Part III. Popular Suppression When Violence is Costly

In Africa's post-Cold War autocracies, elections constitute "focal moments" for popular protests. Citizens are engaged, discontent is palpable, and frustration can quickly coalesce into protest. By occasionally sanctioning human rights violations, the international community has forced Africa's autocrats to confront these recurrent opportunities for collective action without easy recourse to violence. Part III features three chapters that explore how Africa's autocrats suppress popular unrest.

Chapter 6. Regional Governance and the Internal Security Apparatus

How do Africa's autocrats choose among regional governance strategies? How how do these regional governance strategies condition how they construct their internal security apparatuses? Following Carter and Hassan (Forthcoming), I identify two broad regional governance strategies: co-optation

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[3]On public non-compliance induced by electoral uncertainty, see, most recently, Reuter and Szakonyi (2019).

[4]This insight is not new, as parallel governments have been widely documented in internal security apparatuses. See, for instance, Waterbury (1983), Makiya (1998), Quinlivan (1999), Haber (2006), Policzer (2009), Svolik (2012), Makara (2013), Greitens (2016), Blaydes (2018), Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018).

[5]Note that freemasonry has been widely documented as critical to politics in Central Africa; see Heilbrunn (2014).

and suppression. I argue that autocrats choose between these strategies based on a region's *ex ante* support for the regime. In core support regions, autocrats employ co-optation by fostering local embeddedness; they appoint in-group regional executives and grant them relatively long tenures. Outside core regions, where support is less assured, leaders employ suppression. They appoint regional executives who are drawn from afar and shuffle them frequently. By preventing shared social bonds between regional executives and the local population, leaders aim to ensure the compliance of regional executives during moments of crisis. This suppression strategy entails a drawback, however. By relying on non-native appointees to implement the suppression strategy, autocrats may compromise their intelligence gathering apparatuses in non-core support regions.[6] To compensate for the lack of local knowledge at the senior level, autocrats populate the lower ranks of the regional security apparatus with a mix of demographic backgrounds: some from the local area to augment intelligence collection, and others from the autocrat's in-group to monitor their counterparts.

Empirically, I draw on two datasets: one of all regional executives appointed by Sassou Nguesso since his 1997 return, and another that records some 15,000 appointments to the security apparatus between September 2006 and November 2009. These datasets also enable me to probe whether autocrats reconfigure their internal security apparatuses ahead of elections. While I find no evidence of changes to the regional security apparatus, I find striking changes to the Brazzaville-based units most directly responsible for Sassou Nguesso's personal security.

Chapter 7. Defusing the Focal Moment (or, Negotiating Election Seasons)

Why do dictators organize elections? In Africa, the answer is historical: because autocrats conceded them during the Third Wave of Democracy and have abided them since. In Africa's post-Cold War autocracies, the salient question is this: How do autocrats defuse these focal moments, especially when repression is costly? I sketch a theory of electoral competition that emphasizes two possibilities: mollifying citizens' grievances and undermining the opposition leaders who are focal. The former attempts to moderate the motivations to protest; the latter attempts to discourage coordination. The framework features four sets of participants: the autocrat, his loyalist candidates, the opposition, and citizens. I assume the autocrat can secure electoral victory with fraud, and so I focus on two strategic choices: whether to require multiple loyalist candidates to compete against each other (which I refer to as "loyalist electoral competition"), and whether to form an electoral alliance with an opposition party (and, if so, which).

Loyalist electoral competition incentivizes loyalist candidates to invest more of their personal resources in gift-giving, which generates support for the regime. But it also is potentially risky: It incentivizes loyalists to build patronage networks that could one day rival the autocrat's own. When, then, do autocrats require loyalist electoral competition? I argue that autocrats are more likely to employ loyalist electoral competition under two conditions: when his favor is more important to a loyalist's career prospects than popular support, and in his non-core support regions, where

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[6]See, for instance, Kalyvas (2006) and Lyall (2010).

the marginal gain of loyalist competition is higher. I test the second hypothesis with a dataset of Congo's legislative elections since Sassou Nguesso's 1997 return.

When autocrats can secure victory with electoral fraud, I argue that autocrats form electoral alliances with opposition opposition parties chiefly to undermine *focal individuals*: the opposition leaders with the greatest capacity to mobilize unrest. Drawing on LeBas (2011) and others,[7] I argue that the most focal opposition leaders are those who preside over large, identity-based parties. By endorsing the regime autocrat, opposition leaders become publicly associated with the corrupt regime they once impugned, which, for their followers, amounts to a moral transgression. This chapter draws on a dataset of Congo's 129 political parties. After establishing that Sassou Nguesso targets large, identity-based parties, I show that electoral alliances cause opposition parties to splinter shortly after the alliance.

Chapter 8. Flooding the Information Environment

In Carter and Carter (2019), my co-author and I argue that many of Africa's autocrats employ "honest propaganda." By mixing fact with fiction, their propaganda apparatuses obtain some amount of credibility to manipulate citizens' beliefs during moments of crisis. The other key feature of their propaganda apparatuses is the proliferation of different news brands across different media platforms. In addition to his flagship propaganda newspaper,[8] for instance, Sassou Nguesso maintains at least five other online news brands.[9] In addition to the state TV station,[10] Sassou Nguesso maintains at least three other TV news brands.[11] Each of these platforms, moreover, boasts a substantial social media presence. These outlets compete against a handful of independent news sources, *La Semaine Africaine*, Central Africa's oldest newspaper, chief among them. I argue that Africa's autocrats finance a broad range of propaganda outlets to capitalize on uncertainty about their ownership structures. This entails a range of benefits. Pro-regime coverage is more credible when its author is not obviously the regime itself. Moreover, when ostensibly independent news sources print content that is similar to the regime's flagship newspaper, the newspaper itself gains more credibility.

Empirically, this chapter draws on a corpus of roughly 100,000 articles from seven different propaganda brands across three different media platforms, as well as roughly 50,000 articles from *La Semaine Africaine*, the flagship independent newspaper. The chapter also draws on a survey experiment, which measures the uncertainty surrounding Sassou Nguesso's ownership of different news brands and their concomitant capacity to persuade.

Part IV. Loosening the (International) Constraints that Bind

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[7]Tilly (1978), McAdam (1982), McAdam (1986), Gould (1991, 1993, 1995), Goldstone (1994), Fearon and Laitin (1996), Lyall (2006), Lewis (2012), Larson and Lewis (2014).

[8]*Les Depeches de Brazzaville.*

[9]Vox Congo, Ici Brazza, Les Echos du Congo, Portail 242

[10]Télé Congo

[11]Vox TV, MNTV, Top TV

Chapter 2 documented the new strategic landscape that Africa's autocrats confront. International forces are a key part. They helped catalyze the Third Wave of Democracy, which saddled autocrats with regular elections. They have constrained recourse to violence at certain moments, and at those same moments helped emboldened citizen protests. If these international forces are constraining, we should expect Africa's autocrats to attempt to loosen them. Part IV features two chapters that document these efforts.

Chapter 9. Purchasing Influence in Western Capitals

Africa's autocrats have long sought to diminish international pressure for reforms by purchasing influence in Western capitals. Former Gabonese President Omar Bongo, for instance, financed electoral campaigns in France in exchange for a French military installation adjacent to Libreville's Presidential Palace.[12] These influence campaigns are generally surreptitious, however, and so studying them systematically is difficult. To circumvent these data constraints, I focus on when Africa's autocrats attempt to purchase influence in Washington by hiring lobbyists. I show that lobbying campaigns are most common when Africa's autocrats want to escape international oversight and inoculate themselves from international pressure: during election seasons, following coups, amidst domestic military operations, and to expedite debt relief. Lobbying campaigns are less commonly associated with prominent events in American politics.

Empirically, I draw on influence operations disclosed by Washington lobbyists as part of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). I expand my focus to include several of Africa's most durable autocrats: Paul Biya of Cameroon, Ali Bongo of Gabon, Idriss Déby of Chad, Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea, and Faure Gnassingbé of Togo, in addition to Sassou Nguesso. The dataset records some 50,000 activities disclosed by Washington lobbyists.

Chapter 10. Outward Facing Propaganda

Chapter 8 focused on efforts to manipulate the beliefs of citizens domestically; Chapter 10 focuses on efforts to manipulate the beliefs of citizens abroad. Why would Africa's autocrats invest in manipulating the beliefs of citizens on whom their survival does not directly rely? For Africa's post-Cold War autocrats, I argue, outward facing propaganda is an effort to image launder: to normalize them in the eyes of the world. I document a series of outward facing propaganda apparatuses. Africa 24 is a pan-African media platform co-owned by Cameroon's Paul Biya and Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang. *Forbes Afrique*, a magazine that targets Africa's tech and financial elite, is financed by Sassou Nguesso, who, since April 2016 has enjoyed a marriage alliance with François Soudan, the editor-in-chief of *Jeune Afrique*, a leading Paris-based current affairs magazine. In 2011, the nephew of Sassou Nguesso's domestic propaganda chief purchased *Le Monde*, France's leading center-left newspaper. Many believe that at least part of the capital for the transaction came from Sassou Nguesso, who also lured Africanews, Euronews's subsidiary, to Brazzaville with

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[12]Ghazvinian (2007), Shaxson (2007), Heilbrunn (2014).

promises of a fully-financed headquarters along the Congo River. In addition to these flagships, many of Africa's autocrats also hire Washington PR firms to distribute press releases to major wire services and media platforms.

Empirically, this chapter draws on all of these. I probe how *Jeune Afrique*'s coverage of Sassou Nguesso changed after the marriage alliance, and how *Le Monde*'s coverage of Sassou Nguesso changed after its 2011 sale. I show that Africa 24, *Forbes Afrique*, and Africanews presents their benefactors as continental leaders, but always alongside other legitimate news content. I probe when Africa's autocrats hire PR firms and how their press releases condition subsequent coverage in American media outlets.

Part V. The Way Forward

Chapter 11. Conclusion
The manuscript's conclusion proposes a range of topics for future research.

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