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Introduction

The Anatomy of Dictatorship

> Still democracy appears to be safer and less liable to revolution than oligarchy. For in oligarchies there is the double danger of the oligarchs falling out among themselves and also with the people . . .
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> Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book 5

> [W]herein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them . . . , the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.
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> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Bashar al-Asad was not meant to be a dictator. Although he was the son of Syria's long-serving president, Hafez al-Asad, Bashar's education and career were nonpolitical. In 1988, at the age of twenty-three, he received a degree in ophthalmology from the University of Damascus and moved to London four years later to continue his medical residency. Hafez al-Asad had instead groomed Bashar's older brother, Basil, as his successor. Yet Bashar's seclusion from politics ended in 1994 when Basil died in an automobile accident. Bashar was recalled from London, entered a military academy, and quickly advanced through the ranks, while his father spent the last years of his life eliminating potential challengers to Bashar's succession.[1]

Consider Bashar al-Asad's delicate position on July 17, 2000, when he became the Syrian president. Given his unexpected path to power, how does he best ensure his survival in office? What threats should he expect and how will he deal with them?

Alas, the contemporary political scientist is not well equipped to become the new Machiavelli. If Bashar al-Asad were concerned about politically succeeding in a democracy, students of politics might offer him suggestions ranging from how to best target voters in campaigns to the implications of electoral systems

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[1] See Hinnebusch (2002), Leverett (2005), and Perthes (2006).

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for partisan competition.[2] But of course, if Bashar al-Asad lived in a democracy, he would not have been in a position to inherit a presidency.

Although growing at a fast pace, contemporary scholarship on dictatorships has so far generated only a fragmented understanding of authoritarian politics. Extant research increasingly studies authoritarian parties, legislatures, bureaucracies, and elections, as well as repression, leadership change, and regime stability across dictatorships.[3] Yet in most cases, these facets of authoritarianism are examined individually, in isolation. In turn, we lack a unified theoretical framework that would help us to identify key actors in dictatorships; locate the sources of political conflict among them; and thereby explain the enormous variation in institutions, leaders, and policies across dictatorships.[4] At both the empirical and theoretical level, we are without a general conceptual heuristic that would facilitate comparisons across polities as diverse as Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and contemporary China. This book attempts to fill that void.

I argue that two conflicts fundamentally shape authoritarian politics. The first is between those who rule and those who are ruled. All dictators face threats from the masses, and I call the political problem of balancing against the majority excluded from power *the problem of authoritarian control*. Yet dictators rarely control enough resources to preclude such challenges on their own – they therefore typically rule with a number of allies, whether they be traditional elites, prominent party members, or generals in charge of repression. A second, separate political conflict arises when dictators counter challenges from those with whom they share power. This is *the problem of authoritarian power-sharing*. To paraphrase Aristotle's warning in this chapter's epigraph, authoritarian elites may fall out both with the people and among themselves.

Crucially, whether and how dictators resolve the problems of power-sharing and control is shaped by two distinctively dismal features of authoritarian politics. First, dictatorships inherently lack an independent authority with the power to enforce agreements among key political actors, especially the dictator, his allies, and their repressive agents. Second, violence is an ever-present and ultimate arbiter of conflicts in authoritarian politics. These two intrinsic features uniquely shape the conduct of politics in dictatorships. They limit the role that political institutions can plausibly play in resolving the problems of power-sharing and control, and they explain the gruesome manner in which so many dictators and dictatorships fall. Authoritarian politics takes place in the shadow of betrayal and violence.

In brief, the central claim of this book is this: Key features of authoritarianism – including institutions, policies, as well as the survival of leaders and regimes – are shaped by the twin problems of power-sharing and control against

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[2] See, e.g., Green and Gerber (2004) and Cox (1997), respectively.
[3] See subsequent chapters for a detailed discussion of this literature.
[4] Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) and Wintrobe (1998) are two notable exceptions to the tendency for fragmentary explanations of authoritarian politics.

the backdrop of the dismal conditions under which authoritarian politics takes place. They explain why some dictators, like Saddam Hussein, establish personal autocracy and stay in power for decades; why leadership changes elsewhere are regular and institutionalized, as in contemporary China; why some authoritarian regimes are ruled by soldiers, as Uganda was under Idi Amin; why many dictatorships, like PRI-era Mexico, maintain regime-sanctioned political parties; and why a country's authoritarian past casts a long shadow over its prospects for democracy.

In the chapters that follow, I develop theoretical arguments that elaborate on and qualify this claim, and I present empirical evidence that supports it.

1.1 THE TWO PROBLEMS OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE

A typical journalistic account of authoritarian politics invokes the image of a spontaneously assembled crowd in the central square of a country's capital; throngs of people chant "Down with the dictator!" as the leader engages in a desperate attempt to appease or disperse the assembled masses. Some of these accounts end with the dictator's downfall, potentially opening the way for a democratic future.

Recall the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu, whose brutal and erratic rule ended in 1989 after a government-sanctioned rally swelled into a successful popular uprising. Following nearly a decade of severe shortages of essential goods under a draconian austerity program, riots erupted in the town of Timişoara in December 1989. When the government called for a rally in the capital of Bucharest – during which Ceauşescu intended to condemn the riots – the crowd of roughly 100,000 people grew unruly and demanded that Ceauşescu step down. Ceauşescu first attempted to quell the protesters with promises of higher salaries but, when unsuccessful, he ordered the security forces to disperse the crowd. After protests abruptly spread across the country, however, the army refused to continue to use force against the population. Within three days, Ceauşescu was arrested and, after a summary military trial, he was executed along with his wife.[5]

The confrontation between Ceauşescu's regime and the Romanian masses epitomizes the first of the two fundamental problems of authoritarian rule that I identify – *the problem of authoritarian control*. Most academic studies of authoritarian politics frame the central political conflict in dictatorships in these terms alone, that is, as one between a small authoritarian elite and the much larger population over which it rules. The now-classic literature on totalitarianism (Arendt 1951; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965) examined the instruments with which authoritarian elites dominate the masses, like ideology and secret police. More recently, Gandhi and Przeworski (2006) and Gandhi (2008) argued that the threat of popular opposition compels dictators to share rents and establish certain political institutions (e.g. legislatures) that lend

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[5] For an account and analysis of these events, see, e.g., Siani-Davies (2007).

credibility to such concessions. And while Acemoglu and Robinson (2001) and Boix (2003) focus on transitions to democracy, they also identify the possibility of a mass uprising as the chief threat to a dictator's hold on power, and they emphasize the role of repression in precluding a regime change.[6]

Yet the view of authoritarian politics as primarily one of a struggle between the elites in power and the masses excluded from power is severely incomplete. If the problem of authoritarian control were indeed the paramount political conflict in dictatorships, then we would expect dictators to fall after a defeat in a confrontation with the masses, as Ceauşescu did in 1989. Simply stated, conventional wisdom dictates that if and when things go wrong for dictators, it will be because of a successful popular uprising.

Comprehensive data on leadership changes in dictatorships sharply contradict this conventional understanding. Figure 1.1 summarizes the various non-constitutional ways by which dictators lose office. It includes all 316 authoritarian leaders who held office for at least one day between 1946 and 2008 and lost power by nonconstitutional means.[7] Such means include any type of exit from office that did *not* follow a natural death or a constitutionally mandated process, such as an election, a vote by a ruling body, or a hereditary succession. Among the 303 leaders for whom the manner by which they lost power could be ascertained unambiguously, only thirty-two were removed by a popular uprising and another thirty stepped down under public pressure to democratize – this accounts for only about one-fifth of nonconstitutional exits from office. Twenty more leaders were assassinated and sixteen were removed by foreign intervention.

Yet as Figure 1.1 strikingly reveals, the remaining 205 dictators – more than two-thirds – were removed by regime insiders: individuals from the dictator's inner circle, the government, or the repressive apparatus. In my data, I refer to this type of leader exit from office as a *coup d'état*.[8] This is how Leonid Brezhnev replaced Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, how a group of military officers ousted the Ghanian President Kwame Nkhruma in 1966, and how the recently deposed Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali got rid of his predecessor in 1987. Coups overshadow the remaining forms of exit from office even after we set aside those dictators who stayed in office for less than a year – these

[6] Even in O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) and Przeworski's (1991, chap. 2) classic work, where elite defections by "soft-liners" lead to a democratic transition, the initial impetus for elite defection often comes from mass pressures for democratization.

[7] I focus on nonconstitutional leadership changes because, in these instances, a leadership change most plausibly occurred nonconsensually – against the will of the incumbent leader. (It might not be surprising that an authoritarian incumbent would be replaced by a political or institutional insider when a leadership change is consensual, as during a hereditary succession for instance.) I describe these data in detail in Chapter 2; see also the codebook on my Web site.

[8] Here, the term *coup d'état* refers to a forced removal of an authoritarian leader by *any* regime insider, not necessarily the military. (The latter is often implied in popular usage of the term.) For a discussion of the various terms associated with a couplike removal of governments, see Luttwak (1968, Chap. 1).
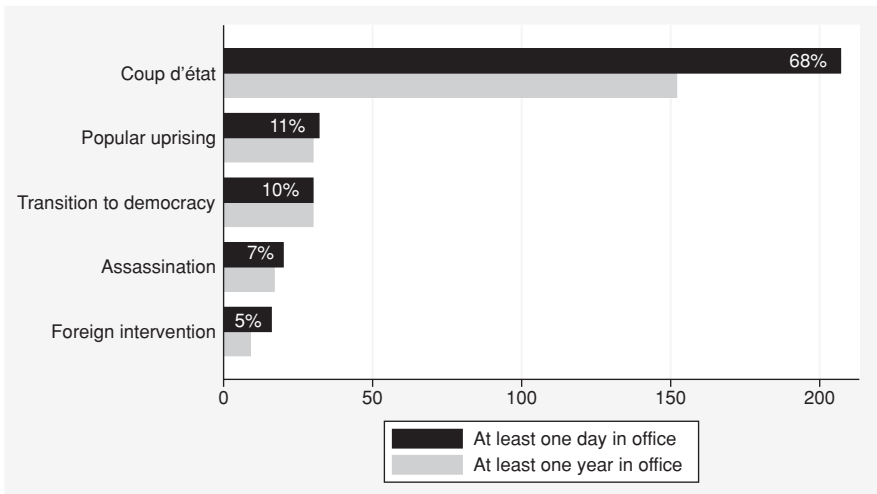
FIGURE 1.1. Nonconstitutional exits from office of authoritarian leaders, 1946–2008. *Note:* Percentages refer to a category's share of all nonconstitutional exists. Exits of interim leaders are not included. Unambiguous determination of exit was not possible for thirteen leaders.

short-lived leaders may have been more vulnerable because of their inexperience in office or a weaker hold on power.[9]

Thus as far as authoritarian leadership dynamics are concerned, an overwhelming majority of dictators lose power to those inside the gates of the presidential palace rather than to the masses outside. The predominant political conflict in dictatorships appears to be not between the ruling elite and the masses but rather one *among* regime insiders. This is the second of the two problems of authoritarian rule that I identify: the problem of authoritarian power-sharing. The evidence I just reviewed suggests that to understand the politics of dictatorships, we must examine why and how a conflict among authoritarian elites undermines their ability to govern.[10] I undertake this task in Part I of this book.

1.1.1 The Problem of Authoritarian Power-Sharing

When he assumed office, Bashar al-Asad – like most dictators – did not personally control enough resources to govern alone. Toward the end of his life, Bashar's father Hafez al-Asad assembled a coalition of old comrades-in-arms, business elites, and Baath Party officials who would support his son's succession to the Syrian presidency.[11] This is what I call a *ruling coalition* – a set of

[9] I elaborate on the latter rationale in Chapter 3.
[10] Various aspects of such conflicts among authoritarian elites have been studied by Ramsayer and Rosenbluth (1995), Geddes (1999a), Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), Brownlee (2007a), Gehlbach and Keefer (2008), Magaloni (2008), Myerson (2008), and Guriev and Sonin (2009).
[11] See Leverett (2005) and Perthes (2006).

individuals who support a dictator and, jointly with him, hold enough power
to guarantee a regime's survival. This terminology is inspired by its semantic
counterpart in Soviet politics: Stalin's inner circle came to be known as the
"select group," the "close circle," or – most commonly – the "ruling group."[12]

Chapters 3 and 4 explain why power-sharing between a dictator and his
ruling coalition so frequently fails. A key obstacle to successful authoritarian
power-sharing is the dictator's desire and opportunity to acquire more power
at the expense of his allies. In dictatorships, the only effective deterrent against
such opportunism is the allies' threat to replace the dictator. Throughout this
book, I refer to such elite-driven attempts to remove an authoritarian leader as
allies' rebellions, mirroring the language of the right to a "baronial rebellion"
recognized by the Magna Carta of 1215. Of course, the closest empirical coun-
terpart of such rebellions are the coups d'état that I just discussed. Quite often
though, leaders of successful rebellions characterize them in a language that is
more suggestive of their righteous motives – as in the case of the Corrective
Revolution of 1970 that brought Hafez al-Asad's faction of the Baath Party to
power in Syria.

Chapter 3 examines the most blatant failure of authoritarian power-sharing:
the emergence of personal autocracy. I explain why a power trajectory along
which an authoritarian leader, like Joseph Stalin, assumes office as the "first
among equals" but succeeds over time in accumulating enough power to
become an invincible autocrat is both possible and unlikely. The possibility
of such "upward mobility" is intimately tied to the distinctively toxic condi-
tions under which authoritarian elites must operate. When they cannot rely
on an independent authority to compel the dictator to share power as agreed
and when violence looms in the background, a small dose of uncertainty about
a rebellion's success will limit the allies' ability to credibly deter the dictator
from attempting to usurp power at their expense. If he succeeds in several such
attempts, the dictator may accumulate enough power to entirely undermine the
allies' capacity to stop him. Hence the emergence of personal autocracy should
be a rare but nevertheless systematic phenomenon across dictatorships.

This logic implies that the interaction between a dictator and his allies gen-
erally takes only two politically distinct forms. Under the first, which I call
contested autocracy, politics is one of balancing between the dictator and the
allies – the allies are capable of using the threat of a rebellion to check the dic-
tator's opportunism, albeit imperfectly. By contrast, *established autocrats* have
acquired so much power that they can no longer be credibly threatened by their
allies – they have effectively monopolized power. In fact, many accounts by
classical philosophers and historians identify precisely this analytical distinc-
tion: Machiavelli distinguishes between the King of France, who cannot take
away the privileges of his barons "without endangering himself," and the Turk,
whose ministers are his "slaves." Meanwhile, historians of the Soviet Union
distinguish between the pre–Purges and the post–Purges Stalin that achieved

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[12] The corresponding Russian terms are *uzkii sostav*, *blizhnii krug*, and *rukovodiashchaia grupa*,
respectively. See Gorlizki and Khlevniuk (2004, 47).

"limitless power over the fate of every Soviet official"; and historians of China distinguish between the pre–1958 Mao, who "listened to interests within the system," and the "later Mao," who simply overrode them.[13] Hence the transition from contested to established autocracy represents the degeneration of authoritarian power-sharing into personal autocracy.

Chapter 3 thus explains the emergence of a prominent class of dictatorships that have been alternatively referred to as *personalist, neopatrimonial, or sultanistic*.[14] In these regimes, leaders have managed to wrestle power away from the individuals and institutions that originally brought them to power – whether they be parties, militaries, or dynastic families. My arguments clarify why such dictators – like Fidel Castro, who ruled Cuba for a half-century until his retirement in 2008 – emerge across all kinds of dictatorships, develop personality cults, and enjoy long tenures: They have effectively eliminated any threats from their ruling coalition. This last point helps us understand not only the variation in the length of dictators' tenures but also the manner by which they lose office. When established autocrats ultimately leave office, it is most likely by a process that is unrelated to the interaction with their allies. Accordingly, Saddam Hussein was brought down by a foreign occupier, Muammar Qaddafi by a popular uprising, and Joseph Stalin by a stroke – none of them at the hands of their inner circle.

My emphasis shifts from the failure of authoritarian power-sharing to its potential success in Chapter 4. One factor that exacerbates the gruesome character of dictatorships is the secrecy that typically pervades interactions among authoritarian elites. Yet unlike the potential for violence or the lack of an independent authority that would enforce agreements among the dictator and his allies, the lack of transparency among authoritarian elites might be curtailed, if not eliminated, by adopting appropriate political institutions. These most often take the form of high-level, deliberative, and decision-making bodies – committees, politburos, or ruling councils – and are usually embedded within authoritarian parties and legislatures.[15]

Formal political institutions alleviate monitoring problems in authoritarian power-sharing in two distinct ways. Institutions like the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China (1949–present), the Chilean Junta Militar de Gobierno under Pinochet (1973–1990), and the Consultative Council of Saudi Arabia (1993–present) typically establish formal rules concerning membership, jurisdiction, protocol, and decision making that both facilitate the exchange of information among the ruling elites and provide for an easy assessment of compliance with those rules.[16] Thus regular, institutionalized

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[13] See Machiavelli (2005[1513], 16–17), Khlevniuk (2009, 247), and Teiwes (2001, 79).
[14] On these concepts, see Zolberg (1966), Roth (1968), Jackson and Rosberg (1982), Snyder (1992), Bratton and Van de Walle (1997), Linz and Chehabi (1998), Geddes (1999a), and Brownlee (2002).
[15] On authoritarian parties, see Brownlee (2007a), Geddes (2008), Gehlbach and Keefer (2008), Greene (2007), Magaloni (2006), and Smith (2005); on legislatures, see Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), Gandhi (2008), Malesky (2009), Ramseyer and Rosenbluth (1995), and Wright (2008a).
[16] See Barros (2002), MacFarquhar (1997a), and Herb (1999) on these institutions in Chile, China, and Saudi Arabia, respectively.

interaction between the dictator and his allies results in greater transparency among them and, by virtue of their formal structure, institutions provide a publicly observable signal of the dictator's commitment to power-sharing. The first mechanism prevents misperceptions among the allies about the dictator's actions from escalating into unnecessary, regime-destabilizing confrontations; the second mechanism reassures the allies that the dictator's potential attempts to usurp power will be readily and publicly detected.

As we shall see in Chapter 4, the above functions have been notably performed by the political machinery that has governed Chinese leadership politics since Jiang Zemin. After Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s, key decision-making bodies within the Chinese Government and the Communist Party began meeting regularly, following formal rules of consultation, division of labor, and consensual decision making. At the same time, tenure in key government posts – including the presidency and premiership – was limited to no more than two five-year terms, and informal rules about similar term limits as well as retirement age provisions were established for those within leading party bodies.[17] Formal political institutions in dictatorships thus alleviate monitoring problems in authoritarian power-sharing and, as we shall see after examining data from all dictatorships throughout the period 1946–2008, they indeed enhance the stability of authoritarian ruling coalitions.

Crucially, Chapter 4 clarifies not only the benefits but also the limits to the contribution of institutions to authoritarian power-sharing. While institutions have the potential to alleviate monitoring problems in authoritarian power-sharing, the dictator's opportunism must not only be detected but also punished. As in Chapter 3, the credibility of any threat by the ruling coalition to sanction the dictator ultimately depends on the allies' ability to remove him from office. Chapter 4 clarifies how the balance of power between the two relates to the intensity of the allies' collective action problem in replacing the dictator and, hence, to the credibility of that threat. We will see that the dictator's compliance with institutional constraints will be self-enforcing only under a permissive balance of power within the ruling coalition. Institutions will be ineffective or break down when not backed by a credible threat of force.

This is why, in China, formal institutions of "collective leadership" successfully governed the tenures of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao but failed to constrain Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Jiang and Hu were "first among equals" within two evenly balanced political coalitions. By contrast, Mao and Deng commanded a following and charisma that eclipsed any of their contemporaries. Chapter 4 thus answers a major conceptual and empirical question that has preoccupied research on authoritarian politics: When and why do some dictatorships establish and maintain institutions that effectively constrain their leaders?

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[17] See Baum (1997), Huang (2008), Li (2010), Manion (1992), Miller (2008), Nathan (2003), and Teiwes (2001).

1.1.2 The Problem of Authoritarian Control

In March 2011, the Arab Spring came to Syria. Protests against Bashar al-Asad's regime broke out in the southern city of Dera'a on March 18 and, by the end of the month, mass protests erupted across the entire country. This is when Bashar al-Asad found himself facing the second of the two fundamental problems of authoritarian rule examined in this book: the problem of authoritarian control. Recall that this problem concerns the conflict between the authoritarian elites in power and the masses that are excluded from power.

Asad's first response to the protests was to offer restive Syrians some proverbial "carrots." In fact, even before the actual protests began, the regime had already frozen rising electricity prices, increased heating-oil subsidies, and raised salaries for public workers – anticipating that the wave of uprisings emerging across the Middle East may spread to Syria. A few weeks later came the "sticks": By late April, the government was stepping up arrests, imprisoning activists, and firing live rounds on demonstrators across the country.[18]

Bashar al-Asad's response to the Arab Spring exemplifies two principal ways in which dictators resolve the problem of authoritarian control: *repression* and *co-optation*. I study these two instruments of authoritarian control in Part II of this book.

At least since Machiavelli, political thinkers have offered varied advice about whether it is better to be loved than feared. Machiavelli favored the latter because "a wise prince should establish himself on that which is in his own control and not in that of others."[19] More recently, Wintrobe (1998) explicitly contrasted repression and co-optation, treated the two as substitutes, and attributed the variation in their use across dictatorships to the preferences of individual dictators. Others have addressed repression and co-optation in isolation. The classic literature on totalitarianism and bureaucratic authoritarianism in Latin America focuses primarily on repression, as does more recent research.[20] Meanwhile, in the literature on elections, legislatures, and parties in dictatorships, the key mechanism is almost exclusively co-optation.[21]

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[18] See "Hard Choices for the Government," *The Economist*, 22 January 2011; "E.U. Bans Syrian Oil as Protests Continue," *The New York Times*, 3 September 2011; "A Cycle of Violence May Take Hold," *The Economist*, 9 April 2011; and "More Stick Than Carrot," *The Economist*, 12 May 2011.

[19] Chap. XVII, "Concerning Cruelty And Clemency, And Whether It Is Better To Be Loved Than Feared" in Machiavelli (2005 [1513]).

[20] On totalitarianism, see Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) and Arendt (1951); on bureaucratic authoritarianism, see O'Donnell (1973) and Stepan (1974, 1988); for more recent research on repression, see Davenport (2007), Gregory et al. (2006), Gregory (2009), Lorentzen (2009), and Robertson (2011). In a related line of research, Egorov et al., (2009) and Lorentzen (2008) examine the role of censorship in dictatorships.

[21] On elections, see Blaydes (2007) and Lust-Okar and Jamal (2002); on legislatures, see Gandhi and Przeworski (2006), Gandhi (2008), and Malesky (2009); on parties, see Brownlee (2007a), Gehlbach and Keefer (2008), and Magaloni (2006, 2008).

At first glance, the difference between repression and co-optation may seem to be simply one between negative and positive incentives for compliance with the regime – "sticks and carrots" in popular parlance. Repression, however, is much more than co-optation's evil twin. When we examine the two in isolation or treat them as substitutes, we may overlook that differences in their use have far-reaching consequences for the political organization and vulnerabilities of dictatorships.

Heavy reliance on repression – typically by the military – entails a fundamental moral hazard: The very resources that enable a regime's repressive agents to suppress its opposition also empower it to act against the regime itself. Hence once soldiers become indispensable for a regime's survival, they acquire political leverage that they can exploit. Militaries frequently do so by demanding privileges, perks, and policy concessions that go beyond what is necessary for suppressing the regime's opposition – they claim a seat at the table when the spoils of their complicity are divided. As Machiavelli warns in *The Prince*, those emperors who come to power by "corrupting the soldiers" become hostages of "him who granted them the state."[22] This is why the former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali kept his military small and underequipped; why the Iraqi Baath regime disposed of its uniformed accomplices immediately after it came to power in 1968; and why Mao Zedong insisted that the Party must always command the gun.

Nevertheless, no dictatorship can do away with repression. The lack of popular consent – inherent in any political system where a few govern over the many – is the "original sin" of dictatorships. In fact, many dictators do not have much leeway when deciding how much to rely on soldiers for repression. In regimes that face mass, organized, and potentially violent opposition, the military is the only force capable of defeating such threats. For dictators in these circumstances, political dependence on soldiers may be insurmountable.

Meanwhile, other dictators simply inherit politically entrenched militaries when they come to power. These regimes, in turn, must concede to soldiers greater resources, institutional autonomy, and influence over policy. This is why the Egyptian military presides over a complex of commercial enterprises (Cook 2007, 19); why the Honduran military won complete autonomy over its budget and leadership positions after it brought President Ramón Villeda Morales to power in 1954 (Bowman 2002, Chap. 5); and why, in 1973, the Uruguayan military had its political influence institutionalized in a National Security Council that assisted several docile presidents in "carrying out national objectives" (Rouquié 1987, 251).

Chapter 5 explains why bargaining over such concessions between a government and politically entrenched militaries takes a peculiar form: Each side consciously manipulates the risk of actual military intervention, even though both would prefer to avoid it. Military dictatorships emerge when, in the process

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[22] Chap. VII, "Concerning New Principalities Which Are Acquired Either by the Arms of Others or by Good Fortune," in Machiavelli (2005[1513]).