

Personalization of Power and Repression in Dictatorships

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Abstract

This article uses new data measuring gradations of personalism in authoritarian regimes to evaluate the relationship between concentration of power and patterns of repression. It shows that the personalization of power in dictatorships leads to an increase in repression. Given the rise in personalism we are witnessing globally, the findings of this study imply that repression is likely to become more prevalent in dictatorships as a consequence.

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In March 2018, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) removed the two-term limit on the presidency. Xi Jinping's abolition of term limits was the latest in a series of steps taken to concentrate his own personal power (Shirk, 2018). Soon after assuming control in 2012, Xi initiated an anti-corruption campaign in which he purged opponents to strengthen his position in the party and military. Within the military, Xi restructured the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with changes designed to expand his personal control and reinvigorate CCP organs within the military. Xi also took steps to increase his power at the October 2017 Party Congress: he put his personal philosophy into the constitution (only Mao had done so while still in power); cemented his control over selection of new Politburo Standing Committee members; and unveiled a new leadership line-up that conspicuously lacked a clear successor.

For these reasons, the consensus among observers is that the Chinese regime has moved away from the more collective and collegial governance system that has existed post-Mao towards a personalist dictatorship – a regime where power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual (Geddes, 1999). Some have expressed concerns that repression in China will increase as a result. As one analyst remarked, Xi's personalization “signals the likelihood of another long period of severe repression” (Denyer, 2018). Is this true?

Existing research on the relationship between the “type” of authoritarian system and patterns of repression provides some guidance. It shows that dominant-party regimes (a category China has traditionally fallen under) repress less than other forms of dictatorship (Davenport, 2007*b*). Yet, we lack an understanding of how political changes *within* dictatorships influence patterns of repression.

Fluctuations in the distribution of power between leaders and elites, in particular, are fairly common in dictatorships. China clearly underscores this dynamic. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, the regime leader, Mao, amassed substantial personal power relative to the party and security apparatus. After his death in 1976, however, a far more collegial form of governance emerged that persisted for decades. While Xi has undermined this system of collective governance, the Chinese regime still does not fit the mold of classic personalist rule. Xi has accumulated of power at the expense of the Chinese elite, but the balance of power differs in important ways when

compared to other strongman systems, such as Vladimir Putin's Russia or Kim Jong-un's North Korea. High-level Chinese officials are still vetted by the party apparatus, and – while loyalty to Xi is important for promotion – competence still remains a key criterion (Shirk, 2018: 25). Xi's China, in other words, combines characteristics of both a personalist and dominant-party regime. Generating expectations for repression in such mixed regimes is challenging.

This note informs our understanding by examining how personalization – the process of concentrating of power in the hands of a leader within a regime – influences authoritarian reliance on repression. To do so, we use data capturing gradations of personalism in post-World War II dictatorships (Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018). Our central finding is that personalization of power in dictatorships increases observed repression.

The concept of personalism

Dictatorships differ from one another in important ways and, as a large body of research illustrates, these differences affect their behavior and decisions (e.g., Weeks, 2008; Mattes and Rodriguez, 2014). There are a number of approaches to disaggregating dictatorships. One typology in the literature breaks them down according to whether control over policy, the choice of leadership, and the security apparatus lies with a dominant party, the military, or a single individual (Geddes, 1999). The latter is referred to as a 'personalist' dictatorship. In such regimes, the leader exercises power with little restraint; other institutions often exist, such as a political party, but they do not operate independently of the leader. Chad under Idriss Déby and Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko fit into this category.

Many regimes do not fit squarely into one category, however. For example, the theocracy in Iran that has governed since 1979 is not a classic party-based regime given the current absence of mass political parties. Yet, it mimics aspects of party-based rule with its emphasis on electoral cooptation, allowing factions to air grievances, and institutionalized vetting of political actors. It is not a military-based regime either, despite the influence the Iranian security apparatus maintains. And while the Supreme Leader is the most powerful political actor in Iran, there are multiple centers of power precluding its characterization as a strongman system. Not only does the Iranian

government combine elements of multiple regime types, but the balance of power within the system has shifted over time.

Because power relations are dynamic in autocracies, categorizing authoritarian regimes is difficult. Importantly, levels of personalism can vary not only across regimes but also within them over time, as a continuous trait of authoritarian rule (Hadenius and Teorell, 2007). While personalism is generally highest in personalist dictatorships relative to other forms of dictatorship, relations between a leader and his elite in any system are not static.

Personalization and repression

Authoritarian regimes rely on repression to maintain control and counter threats to their rule (Escriba-Folch, 2013). They repress in a variety of ways, ranging from torture to censorship, each of which has a specific purpose (Wintrobe, 1998; Ritter, 2014). Though all dictatorships repress, levels of repression vary substantially, both within regimes and across them (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor, 2014; Licht and Allen, 2018). We argue that personalization explains increases in repression within an authoritarian regime over time.

There are two reasons to expect this. First, highly personalized dictatorships have fewer mechanisms than other dictatorships to cultivate regime support and maintain control. Personalist dictatorships, therefore, are more likely to rely on repression to preserve their power. Davenport (2007*a,b*) argues that dominant-party regimes repress less than other forms of dictatorship because they feature alternative mechanisms of sociopolitical control, including a strong political party and arenas where political contestation and expression of grievances can take place. Indeed, “[c]hanneling [dissent] is essential because without it political authorities are not provided with a non-coercive means of influence” (2007*b*: 490).

Personalist regimes, in contrast, have few non-coercive means to coopt support or maintain control (Davenport, 2007*b*). They lack strong parties to mobilize followers, tend not to have ideological underpinnings that engender support, and typically hollow out institutions that threaten the leader, leaving few avenues for citizens and elites to express grievances. Weak institutions also mean personalist regimes face greater difficulties gauging levels of dissent, increasing their para-

noia and therefore their proclivity to use repression to respond – or preempt – anti-regime protest. The process of personalization is associated with these same dynamics. Leaders who succeed in amassing personal power shut down alternative pathways of socio-political control and are likely to be especially concerned that their moves to concentrate power will elicit backlash from the public and elite. The process of personalization should therefore be associated with increased repression.

Second, leaders who concentrate their power typically increase their personal influence over the security apparatus. This often entails the creation of security forces that are personally loyal to the leader and/or the reorganization of existing armed groups so they are staffed with leader loyalists. Such personnel choices protect the leader from threats to his rule, but also link the fates of those in the security apparatus with that of the leader. When security actors see their fates as reliant on the leader remaining in power, they become more willing to employ violence to protect the regime. In contrast, professionalized security actors – namely those that serve in a security sector governed by rules, with established paths of career advancement and recruitment, and where promotion is based on performance, not politics – have an identity separate from the state. These officials can typically envision a career regardless of the specific leader in power, rendering them less willing to pursue actions, such as cracking down on protesters, which could tarnish their standing with prospective leaders and the public (Bellin, 2012). The process of personalization, particularly when it entails personalization of the security apparatus, should therefore increase a regime’s willingness to use repression to maintain control.

In sum, personalization of power in dictatorships should increase reliance on repression because leaders: 1) dismantle alternative control mechanisms that threaten their rule, increasing the necessity of repression to maintain power; and 2) place loyalists at the heads of security organizations who are more willing to use coercion to keep the regime in power than more professionalized services.

Empirical approach

We measure personalism using an index compiled by Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018). This index contains eight components, which describe the distribution of power between the leader

and: 1) the support party (if one exists), and 2) the security apparatus. They include whether the leader: makes access to office dependent on personal loyalty; creates a new support party after seizing power; controls appointments to the party executive committee; makes the party executive committee serve as a rubber stamp for his decisions; personally controls the security apparatus; promotes officers loyal to himself or from his support group, or forces officers from other groups to retire; creates paramilitaries or a new security force loyal to himself; and imprisons or kills officers from other groups without a fair trial.¹ While the personalism index has substantial variation over time within the same authoritarian regime, some regimes have higher average levels of personalism than others, such as Libya under Gaddafi compared to the Communist regime in Vietnam.

Regimes are not placed in a static “category” but rather every authoritarian leader is assigned a personalism score for each year. China, for example, has a low personalism value 0 in 1949. But the index value starts rising in 1964 and reaches a peak by 1968, the height of Mao’s powers during the Cultural Revolution. Post-Mao leaders, with the exception of Deng in the early 1990s, have a low score. Increasing yearly values on the personalism index therefore capture the process of personalization, distinguishing this data from other measures of personalism that vary by leader (Weeks, 2014) or by regime (Geddes, 1999).

Repression is the inverse of human rights protection scores from Fariss (2014). The latter are estimates of a latent scale of respect for human rights, which accounts for the changing standards of accountability in human rights norms and reporting. We use two approaches to assess how personalization affects repression. First, we test a fixed effects (FE) model with the goal of providing an unbiased estimate of the correlation between personalism and repression. Second, we use cross-validation to understand how well personalism explains repression relative to other explanatory variables in the literature on repression (Hill and Jones, 2014). For both approaches, we employ data from autocracies from 1950 to 2010.

¹Theses eight indicators can be grouped into two sub-components of personalism, one relating to the *support party* and the other to the *security apparatus*. Appendix D analyzes these sub-components, and shows that items related to the security apparatus are more strongly correlated with repression than items related to the support party.

Hypothesis-testing models To evaluate the statistical correlation between personalization and repression, we estimate two-way FE models, with regime-case and calendar year effects. While we believe a two-way FE model is most likely to yield unbiased estimates of the average treatment effect, we stress that estimating random instead of fixed effects, or changing the fixed cross-section unit to country or leader yields similar results.

The first specification in Figure 1 (a) only includes personalism and two-way fixed effects (unreported). Next we add two variables, GDP per capita (logged) and population (logged), which are standard in structural models of repression (Hill and Jones, 2014), as well as leader time in power (logged), which measures time-varying unobservables such as learning about leader behavior. We then add covariates that capture aspects of conflict: civil conflict; international conflict; and domestic anti-regime protest. The next model omits the conflict variables but adds three variables that capture substantial variation in leaders' backgrounds and non-repressive methods of political control: indicators of whether the regime leader is a senior or junior military officer and a measure of political institutions. The final specification includes all these variables. The estimates for personalism are positive and statistically significant, ranging in size from 0.382 to 0.516 across specifications.

Predictive models of repression Next we assess how well personalism predicts observed repression. We use 10-fold cross-validation that randomly divides the sample data into ten separate folds (or bins), use nine of the folds to generate predictions for the remaining fold, and repeat this routine ten times for each fold. Finally, we calculate the average prediction error across all 10 folds 1,000 times to model the uncertainty around the prediction error for each model. The Appendix shows that a random effects (RE) estimator with a binary indicator for the Cold War has substantially smaller prediction error than the two-way fixed FE models analyzed above. We start with a sparse RE model specification that includes three covariates (a Cold War dummy, GDP per capita (logged), and population (logged) (Hill and Jones, 2014)), and use 10-fold cross validation to calculate predictive accuracy. We then separately add 28 explanatory variables, including personalism, to the model to assess how well these variables predict repression relative to the baseline

specification. Figure 1 (b) shows the results of the cross-validation exercise. The horizontal axis depicts the change in RMSE from adding each variable listed along the vertical axis to the baseline specification. The point estimates are the median change in prediction error and the confidence bands are the 2.5 and 97.5 percentiles of the sampling distribution of the RMSE statistic.

We highlight three results. First, variables that measure domestic dissent – violent protest campaigns, protest, and civil conflict – improve prediction accuracy, consistent with prior literature. Second, some variables measuring ‘democratic-looking’ political institutions – such as multiparty elections, a supporting political party, and the Polity score – generally do not improve predictive accuracy. Other institutional variables, such as legislative competitiveness improve prediction, but only marginally.² Finally, personalism improves predictive accuracy. After measures of dissent and conflict, personalism and judicial independence are the two strongest predictors of repression.

Both modeling approaches yield evidence that personalization is associated with greater repression. Moreover, the size of the effect of personalization on repression is substantively large. Estimates from the tests in Figure 1 indicate that moving from the lowest to the highest levels of personalism is associated with an increase in repression comparable to going from China under normal post-Mao times to China during the year of the Tiananmen Square uprising.

Remarks

In the past few years, Xi has created the most repressive political environment in China since 1989, when the regime cracked down violently on protesters in Tiananmen Square. Observers speculate that Xi’s efforts to expand his power will lead to greater human rights violations in China. Our evidence suggests these speculations are likely to be correct. We find that leaders who amass greater personal power are more likely to increase repression.

Our findings are troublesome in light of personalism’s global rise (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz and Wright, 2017). At the end of the Cold War, 23 percent of all autocracies were ruled by personalist

²The low explanatory power of institutional variables may reflect the possibility that structural features of regime’s historical political economy explain both the choice of institutions and repression or the the possibility that institutions operate differently in different kinds of regimes.

leaders; today 40 percent are. Indeed, many dictators are expanding their personal control. In Cambodia, Hun Sen transformed the regime over the course of more than three decades from a regime in which the Cambodia People's Party played a significant role in decision making to one in which he now reigns supreme. Even contemporary democracies are moving in the direction of greater personalism, as the experiences of the Philippines under Duterte, Hungary under Orban, and Poland under Kaczynski illustrate.

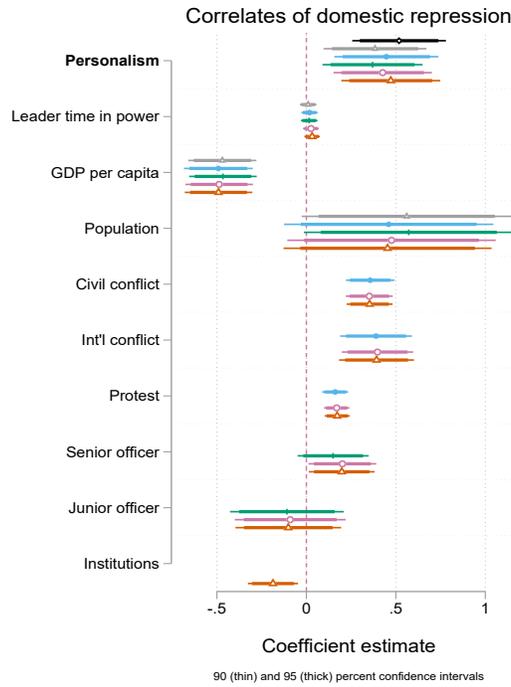
Though we cannot say with certainty whether increases in personalism in democracies are likely to bring with them greater repression, the evidence provided here suggests we are likely to observe heavier reliance on repression in many of the world's dictatorships. With the strongman mode increasingly en vogue in today's global climate, we are likely to see the rights of citizens living under their rule deteriorate as a result.

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(a) Two-way fixed effects



(b) Cross-validation

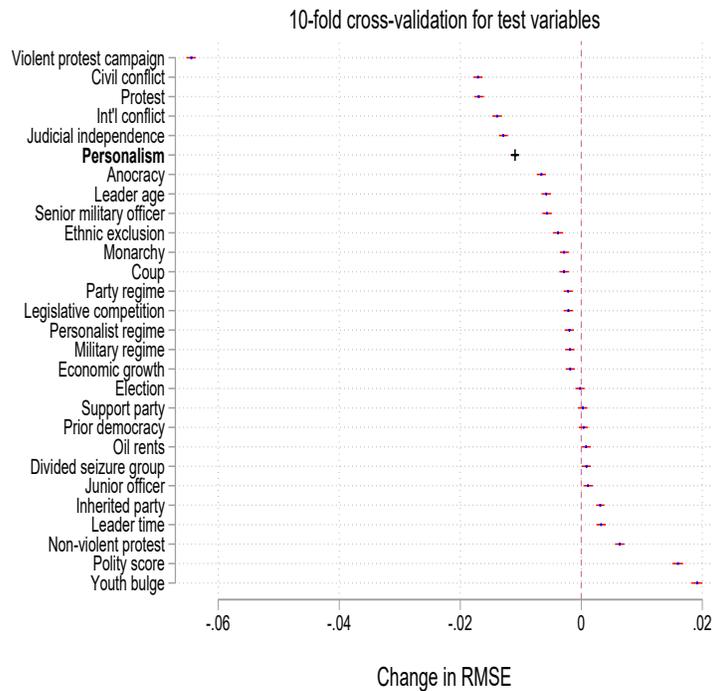


Figure 1: Personalism and repression.