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What causes regime change in African autocracies?

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African states have in recent years shown a vulnerability to military takeovers and the forced removal of established leaders. But these developments in autocracies are not associated with revolutionary change. New research seeks to explain political change in African autocracies by looking at the role of political elites, focussing on cycles of power between a leader and their rivals which determine their survival.

In 2021, coups d'état ousted four heads of state in sub-Saharan Africa. Army interventions in Chad, Mali, Guinea and Sudan halted a years-long decline in military takeovers, in what was heralded the **comeback of the army** in African politics. Elsewhere in Africa, elected leaders in Tunisia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, among others, were accused of enacting authoritarian turns. Common authoritarian measures include suspending parliamentary assemblies, confining opposition leaders, extending term limits and violently repressing opposition and dissent. Here lies an apparent paradox: despite decades in which democratic institutions have become prevalent across the continent, African states continue to be vulnerable to military takeovers and autocratic forms of power.

Multiple interpretations aim to explain this seeming contradiction. A popular explanation suggests that the world, and especially Africa, is entering a new phase of 'democratic backsliding', after a decades-long era during which several leaders were ousted by popular movements. Nowhere was this more evident than in North Africa, where the democratic aspirations of the 2011 Arab Spring were overshadowed by a return to authoritarianism and conflict. Yet, in many of Africa's competitive autocracies, the removal of leaders is not associated with revolutionary change. In fact, there is a remarkable stability of senior elites and institutional practices across regimes, suggesting their resilience in the face of a supposedly teleological trajectory towards democracy.

The literature on political survival provides a more compelling narrative to explain political change in competitive autocracies. A leader's survival is conditioned on the support of senior elites. Leaders can typically spread power among their 'rival allies' to keep it and co-opt enough of those elites in exchange for political support. These actors can in turn leverage their collective power to secure greater influence and rewards from the centre. The concept of a 'political marketplace' has aptly captured the transactional nature of regime strategies to determine association, loyalty and alliances with senior elites, although the delegation and assignment of senior, formal positions appears more prevalent than direct, monetised corruption.

Four stages of the autocratic regime cycle

Drawing on these insights, our paper seeks to explain political change in African competitive autocracies using the notion of 'regime cycles'. This framework, which produced rich insights into the failed democratisation processes of the post-communist states during the 1990s, applies a logic of collective action to analyse elite behaviour, identifying four stages within a regime cycle. Each stage of the cycle is determined by the nature of contestation between the incumbent and senior elites. The balance of power between these actors varies in each stage, according to the level of fragmentation of authority within and across those groups.

The four stages, which do not necessarily follow a chronological order, include accommodation, consolidation, factionalisation and crisis.

During the *accommodation* phase, leaders engage in coalition building by distributing rents and authority among senior elites. The intent of this stage is to remunerate loyalists and co-opt prospective allies, through a logic of integration and inclusion. The narrowing of competitive influences leads to the *consolidation* stage, in which the leader seeks to assert their authority over a coalition of 'rival allies'. This phase coincides with the height of a leader's authority, where the threat of being removed is lowest.

When a leader is perceived to be excessively centralising power and constituting a threat to their authority (for example, after replacing security chiefs with loyalists), senior elites may organise along factional lines to create opposition within the regime. During the *factionalisation* phase, the goal is to renegotiate power relations without splitting from the regime or the ruling party. Factions can consist of rival senior elites, who tactically join their forces to maximise their collective power and force the leader into spreading the power. At this stage, there is no intention of deposing the leader, but rather an attempt to bargain the terms of inclusion and secure representation for the factions. Leaders also use disorder to try and prevent elite cooperation and may encourage factionalisation to lessen the strength of senior elite coalitions.

However, a *crisis* may occur when factions decide to take advantage of a critical juncture to forcibly reshuffle the ruling coalition. These crisis moments are typically associated with heightened instability, as factions and senior elites jostle for replacing the leader. Removals typically take the form of military takeovers as well as forced resignations, constitutional coups and power-sharing agreements. Regime crises reshape the existing power structures by disposing of the old leader and prelude to the co-option of senior elites into a narrow ruling coalition.

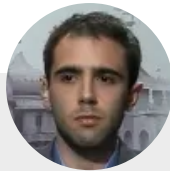
In **our paper**, we apply these observations to understand the events surrounding the removal of three of the longest-serving heads of state in Africa. Between 2017 and 2019, Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Sudan's Omar al-Bashir and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe were ousted after a combined 90 years in power. Our analysis shows that their removal, rather than a direct consequence of mass protests and economic downturns, was the culmination of ripened factionalism, which had blossomed after the leaders' attempts to centralise power. Senior military and security elites, once regime insiders and allies of the ageing autocrats, took advantage of the crisis moment to dispose of the leaders and their loyalists and

reshuffle the regime. Stages of accommodation, consolidation, factionalisation and crisis preceded and followed the removal according to a cyclical logic.

Our analysis emphasises elite dynamics over the role of mass protests and popular opposition. While they can contribute to spark crises within a regime, leaders and senior elites are more likely to produce significant and durable changes. Democratic breakthroughs cannot be ruled out, although they are typically the product of a **political stalemate** rather than ideological preferences or public appeals for political change. The forceful removals observed in 2021 seem to conform to this cyclical logic of political change. Senior elites took advantage of a crisis moment to seize power and reconfigure the regime to their own advantage.

Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels.

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