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Authoritarian regimes rely on candidate selection to constrain legislatures

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A key feature of contemporary autocracy is the incorporation of seemingly democratic institutions. Nearly every autocracy now holds regular multiparty elections and allows legislative bodies to operate. Based on his [research](#), Yonatan Morse highlights how autocrats hedge against the risk of power-sharing through candidate selection to consolidate their power.

Considerable scholarship has investigated how [democratic institutions serve autocracy](#) by allowing dictators to periodically renew the political elite, govern through a set of established rules, and foster new sources of legitimacy. However, the dilemma for dictators is that elections and legislatures can create new sources of political power. A ruler's ability to temper democratic institutions with appropriate authoritarian constraints is key to their political longevity.

Ideally, autocrats can rely on recruitment processes that vet candidates and produce loyal supporters. The challenge in Africa is that there can be a mismatch between the available institutions and the demands placed upon legislators. Not

all regimes have robust ruling parties that can cultivate candidates. At the same time, the financial demands of multiparty competition are substantial. African legislatures are increasingly populated by **business elites**, who **do not necessarily share the goal** of regime longevity. How, then, do autocrats promote candidates who can bear the monetary costs of elected office, yet are also trustworthy interlocutors?

One solution is for regimes to encourage the entry of former civil administrators into elected office. Civil administrators are particularly useful because **they are well-educated** and have gone through significant vetting as part of their career advancement. Thus, emerging from the civil administration mimics, in certain ways, what a more robust party would provide elsewhere. On the other hand, working in the civil administration produces the kind of financially-resourceful candidates that are necessary for electoral competition. Certain forms of civil service like **customs administration** are themselves quite lucrative, and government work also gives legislative candidates access to material networks that are useful during campaigns and in office.

Evolving patterns of candidate selection in Cameroon

To build this argument, I rely on a unique biographical dataset of nearly 600 Cameroonian legislators that served between 1972 and 2019. Cameroon is an important case because it is one of Africa's most enduring '**electoral authoritarian**' regimes. Between 1972 and 1988, it was a single-party regime, but since 1992 there have been lopsided multiparty elections. The ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) initially used local primaries to select candidates. However, that system was replaced in 2013 by one that gave the party's central committee the final say over candidacy.

The data shows how the occupational background of legislators has changed considerably. During the single-party era, most legislators were recruited from either the junior civil administration or the educational sector. However, since 1992 there has been a sharp increase in business elites and other high-income professions. By 2007 such individuals constituted approximately 50 per cent of the legislature, while less lucrative occupations lost considerable representation. The incorporation of primaries also had a destabilising effect. Between 1992 and 2007, approximately 60 to 70 per cent of incumbent CPDM legislators lost their

primary contest. This is congruent with sporadic reporting evidence of local-level competition over candidacy, driven by the influx of money.

This pattern began to change in 2007, especially after the abolishment of primaries. Of the 51 legislators dismissed by the CPDM's central committee in 2013, 39 per cent were businesspeople, while just 16 per cent were former civil administrators. Of their replacements, 43 per cent were civil administrators, and just 20 per cent were businesspeople. This implies a deliberate strategy and an emerging preference for legislators with civil administration experience in response to the growing influence of business. Indeed, during the 2020 selection process – the second one decided by the central committee – 70 per cent of incumbents won their renomination contests, suggesting greater confidence in the legislative slate.

While experience in civil administration is not the only relevant factor, all things being equal, it is significantly correlated with serving additional legislative terms. Factors like age, gender, education, partisan experience, and even incumbency itself do not matter as much. Likewise, former civil administrators are more likely to be nominated for additional terms regardless of the kind of constituency they compete in – rural or urban, ethnically homogenous or heterogeneous, single-member or multimember district.

The data also shows how certain forms of civil administration are prioritised over others. First, civil administrators who worked up the ladder and had the opportunity to be evaluated, with careers that spanned 10 to 20 years are advantaged. Second, working in the territorial rather than national administration is beneficial. This is unsurprising since such figures provide autocrats with legislators who are vetted and resourceful, but also locally tied and possibly better known by the community.

The resilience of authoritarian regimes

Authoritarianism is adaptive to shifting circumstances. The initial changes to candidate selection in Cameroon were in response to the challenge of multipartyism. The subsequent changes were a reaction to the possibly unforeseen hazards of that initial choice.

The ability of an autocrat to adapt depends on the institutional context in which it operates. While Cameroon could rely on the civil administration to recruit more

candidates, that is not necessarily true elsewhere.

Most importantly, while previous scholarship correlates the presence of certain authoritarian institutions like legislatures with authoritarian resilience, **my work** shows that the composition of these institutions matters. It is not enough to know whether an autocratic regime has a legislature, but whether it is populated by individuals who can serve the regime's ends. This reinforces the need to build more country-specific work that moves from studying just institutions to actual individuals.

Photo: Prestation de serment de S.E. Paul BIYA (20). Credit: Office of the President, Republic of Cameroon

About the author



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Yonatan Morse is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut. His recent and ongoing research examines the dynamics of electoral authoritarian regimes, the role of legislatures, and the politics of social protection. His 2019 book *How Autocrats Compete: Parties, Patrons and Unfair Elections in Africa* (Cambridge University Press) explains how autocratic regimes adapt to multiparty elections. He is currently working on a new book project titled *Discovering Welfare: The Politics of Social Protection in Africa*.

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