

The Politics of Uncertainty

Sustaining and Subverting Authoritarian Regimes

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Abstract

Authoritarian rulers have a twin problem of uncertainty. They have a problem of “institutional uncertainty.” Their survival in power is insecure. And they have a problem of “inferential uncertainty.” The foundations of their political survival are opaque. In this paper, I outline a framework for analysis that places the competitive struggle over these uncertainties at the core of competitive struggles over authoritarian stability and change. After discussing the multi-layered sources of institutional uncertainties as well as the theatrical consequences of epistemic uncertainties, I lay out the twin challenges these twin uncertainties involve for regime as well as opposition actors: the construction of political realities and the construction of political appearances.

Authoritarian rulers have a twin problem of uncertainty. They have a problem of *security*. They can never lean back and relax. They have to continually prevent, detect, and contain threats to their hold on power. And they have a problem of *opacity*. They can never know for sure how good they are at preventing, detecting, and containing threats to their survival in power. We can conceive both problems as forms of uncertainty: the *institutional uncertainty* that results from either actual or potential challenges to their rule and the *informational uncertainty* that results from the impossibility of generating secure knowledge on these challenges. Both types of uncertainty are connected and mutually reinforcing. And both are structural. Rulers cannot wish them away but have to cope with them, and so have their opponents.

In authoritarian regimes, political actors may pursue a wide variety of private and political goals. In these pursuits, they need to take into account the informational and institutional uncertainties of authoritarian governance. They also need to passively adapt to the informational and institutional demands of the authoritarian regime. However, once they direct their ambitions to the structures of authoritarian governance themselves, they need to actively shape prevalent beliefs and perceptions about the regime. For rulers to sustain authoritarian governance, they need to influence dominant informational and institutional uncertainties. For opposition actors to subvert authoritarian governance, they need to do the same. The “politics of uncertainty” comprises their twin competition over both informational and institutional uncertainties. As I wish to argue in this paper, it describes the core rationality of contending actors who dispute the basic rules of the political game under authoritarianism. Unfolding under conditions of uncertainty, their competitive struggle *over* uncertainty stands at the very center of their competitive struggle over regime types.

In this paper, I outline a broad framework for analysis that places the twin struggle over uncertainty at the center of institutional conflict in authoritarian regimes. I discuss institutional uncertainties and their treatment in the comparative literature on regimes. I sketch their distant and proximate sources, and offer a typology of threats to authoritarian survival. I describe the informational uncertainties authoritarian governance generates through the denial of rights and liberties. And, finally, I lay out the twin challenges that flow out of these twin uncertainties: the construction of political realities (the management of threats) and the construction of political appearances (the management of threat perceptions).

Institutional Uncertainty

Dictators are notoriously insecure. The power and wealth they control today may slip out of their hands tomorrow. The more they have, the more they have to lose. For many, their occupational hazards translate into personality traits. They turn paranoid, chase real as well as imaginary enemies. Joseph Stalin, loving father of a revolutionary

killing field, had millions of innocents deported, enslaved, and murdered in the presumptive pursuit of regime safety. Even when they display awesome powers, ostentatious wealth, and hedonic lifestyles, dictators are survivors. To enjoy life, they have to escape death. Often by sowing death.

The Role of Institutions

Of course, the uncertainty of the future is an intrinsic part of human life. Human action is forward-oriented. We are aware of the future and care about the future and our role in it, and the future is always unknown and uncertain to some degree. We face natural, transcendental, technological, and systemic uncertainties. Nature threatens us with earthquakes and diseases, God with eternal punishment, technology with plane crashes and nuclear meltdowns, capitalism with unemployment and stock market crashes. Here, I am concerned more narrowly with *social* uncertainties. As human action is by definition indeterminate, social interactions are by definition indeterminate. They are inexhaustible sources of uncertainty. We and others may always act differently than we are supposed to.

While we can never eliminate social uncertainty, we can strive to contain it. Numerous social devices, such as personal trust and social reputation, serve to reduce the uncertainty of future interactions. The core technology for managing social uncertainty, though, are *institutions*. The notion of social institutions is abstract in the extreme. It covers an almost infinite range of empirical phenomena that have nothing in common except one formal property: the reduction of uncertainty. Herein lies the *defining function* of institutions: they stabilize social expectations. This is what disperse social phenomena we often describe as institutions, like corruption, marriage, and courts of justice, have in common: they limit the uncertainty of the future. They do not turn humans into machines, but they do render their interactions predictable within reasonable bounds. Stabilizing expectations is not a matter of all or nothing, though. Strong institutions create deep certainties, weak institutions much less so.¹

Now, descending the ladder of abstraction, *political regimes* are institutions, too. They are sets of formal and informal rules that regulate the occupation of state power: the access to power, the possession of power, the exercise of power. Their role is to stabilize expectations about the hard core of modern political life: How do actors obtain state power, how do they keep it, how do they exercise it? Like other institutions, regimes create more than factual stability. They create expectations of stability. They provide order and constraint today by securing order and constraint tomorrow.²

[Figure 1.1 about here]

Figure 1.1 illustrates the range of possibilities: At the extremes of fully uncertain and fully certain expectations, institutions do not exist.

Worlds of complete uncertainty are institutional voids. Worlds of complete certainty are not of our world. They are kingdoms of an all-controlling God, technological utopia of perfect repetition, or cemeteries of irrevocable death, without flowers, worms, or superstition. In between these poles, we find situations of high, intermediate, and low institutionalization with corresponding (inverse) levels of uncertainty. Just to anticipate subsequent discussions: in the realm of electoral authoritarian regimes, hegemonic regimes display high levels of institutional strength and competitive regimes intermediate levels. In situations of regime crisis, institutions lose their binding character and actors' expectations turn indeterminate (see Chapter 3).

Embedded Uncertainty

One might contend that social expectations are too soft a ground to base our theoretical expectations on. Too soft and volatile and subjective. Ethereal matter. When sociologists tell us that “all social structures are structures of expectation” (Niklas Luhmann) we can accept that as symptomatic of their disciplinary blindness. Sociologists know nothing about the hard structures of political power, right? And yet, if we look closer, we can see that the comparative study of political regimes is built on cognitive foundations. In manifold ways, our theories of regime change and stability are anchored in the seabed of social expectations. Actor expectations about the future form the core of our core concepts. Uncertainty is embedded within concepts such as democracy and authoritarianism, regime transition and consolidation, regime threats, trust and credibility.

- *Regime types:* In democratic regimes, free and fair elections are held according to stable procedures. Their rules are laid out beforehand, their results respected afterwards. Democratic elections provide procedural certainty. At the same time, electoral competition is open and its outcomes are indeterminate. Democratic elections admit substantive uncertainty (see Przeworski 1986). Authoritarian elections follow the inverse logic. Autocrats maintain their prerogative of meddling with procedures and of determining outcomes in advance. They combine procedural uncertainties with substantive certainties.
- *Regime transition:* The founding text of the contemporary literature on regime change, Guillermo O'Donnell's and Philippe Schmitter's small concluding tractatus of the four-volume *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, entered its subject matter precisely by “introducing uncertainty” (1986: Ch. 1). As students of regime change know by heart, the two authors identified the emergence of “extraordinary uncertainty” as the defining feature of regime transitions. Transitions, they observed, lack “the relative stability and predictability” of

normal times. They are times of “disorder” and “indeterminacy” (1986: 3–5). In these transitional “moments of madness” (Zolberg 1972), the potentials of agency and possibility are only matched by the promises of modern consumer culture: “impossible is nothing” (Adidas). In its emphasis on institutional uncertainty, the concept of regime transition resembles the classical notion of crises as well as the related idea of critical junctures (see Merkel et al. 2012). The only difference: “democratic transitions” name their purposeful goal, while crises are open-ended.

- *Regime consolidation*: The broad notion of democratic consolidation means different things to different people in different contexts (see Schedler 1998). According to its “classic” acceptance, it denotes firm expectations of regime survival. If the emergence of uncertainty is the defining feature of democratic transition, its recession is the defining trait of democratic consolidation thus understood. Transitions begin when the prevailing rules of the authoritarian game start looking shaky; processes of consolidation reach closure when democracy starts looking secure. In transitions, regimes lose their secure monopolistic position as “the only game in town” and the irruption of competing political games turns feasible. In processes of consolidation, they acquire such monopolies and manage to crowd out their systemic competitors. Under this perspective, a regime appears as consolidated when all relevant actors expect it to “last well into the foreseeable future” (Valenzuela 1992: 70), when its supporters can lean back and “relax” (Di Palma 1990: 141), trusting its capacity to weather internal or external challenges. It is solidly institutionalized when even its opponents are resigned to its invincibility and accept its persistence “as an unchangeable fact” (Václav Havel, cited in Sluglett 2007: 102).³
- *Regime threats*: While the transition literature has studied unusual times of heightened uncertainty and the consolidation literature its subsequent domestication, the expanding literature on the political economy of dictatorship examines structural sources of uncertainty. It analyzes permanent threats to the survival of leaders that originate in their structural dependencies and vulnerabilities.⁴ Authoritarian leaders are not sovereign. For their exercise of power, they depend on actors who control resources they desire: economic wealth, arms, organization, technology, human capital, legitimacy. In their survival in power, they are vulnerable to actors who control resources they fear: organized violence, above all. Thanks to their endowment with independent resources, these actors pose perennial threats to the capacity of leaders to govern and to survive in government.⁵

Just like the notions of transition and consolidation, the concept of regime threats captures actor expectations and institutional uncertainties. It is a carrier of prospective causal claims. If we describe x as a threat to y , we express the causal expectation that x may harm y in the future. Regime threats are not actual causes of regime breakdown, but *potential causes*. The damage they do lies in the future, not in the past. In contexts of regime struggles, the notion of threats commonly designates *conditional probabilities* that determinate actors turn into sources of institutional uncertainty: If actor x does y (with probability p), then negative institutional consequences z will follow (with probability q).

- *Credibility and trust*: If powerful political actors face existential threats from others, they can choose among two courses of action: They can either try to neutralize their adversaries by changing the prevalent correlation of power, for example, by expropriating, disarming, or eliminating them. Or they can try to accommodate their adversaries and make them accept voluntary restraints on the use of their power resources, for example, by persuading, flattering, or bribing them. The negotiation of mutual restraints is an appealing strategy, but in the absence of a Hobbesian Leviathan its soft spot is obvious: compliance does not rest on reliable enforcement by third parties, but on mutual trust between parties. As any occasional viewer of gangster movies can tell, trust-based compliance is structurally problematic. Trust is an attitude towards the future, it embraces its uncertainty with no more assurance than fallible judgments about the reliability of others. It is a bet. In the power struggles of authoritarian regimes, it is a bet with high stakes.

Much of the literature on the political economy of regimes accordingly revolves around problems of trust and credible commitment. How can the rich trust that the poor will not expropriate them under democratic conditions (Alexander 2002, Boix 2003, Acemoglu and Robinson 2006)? How can they trust the military will not do so under authoritarian conditions (Olson 2000, Haber 2008)? How can rulers trust the military will not topple them (Geddes 2009)? How can elites trust their leaders will not cheat on them (Magaloni 2008, Svobik 2009)? Just like actors under authoritarian rule, the literature on authoritarian rule is haunted by the irresolvable uncertainty of the future. And yet.

Neglected Uncertainty

Despite the pervasive presence of institutional uncertainty, its deep embeddedness in our core concepts, we have neglected the comparative study of uncertainty. Our neglect has been descriptive, theoretical, and political.

Descriptively, we have neglected to study empirical variations in actor expectations. We know very little, and have cared very little to know, how political actors perceive the strength of institutions. For instance, we possess quite a lot of public opinion data about popular support for democracy, yet very few on popular perceptions of democratic resilience.⁶ In part, our reluctance to gather comparative data on subjective perceptions seems to derive from methodological cautions. Taking uncertainty seriously means taking actor expectations seriously. We are often prepared to do so at a conceptual and theoretical level, but not at an empirical level. In the study of political regimes, as in contemporary political science in general, we tend to suffer from methodological schizophrenia. We build our theories on the pillars of strictly unobservable phenomena, such as rational calculation, yet demand our empirical research to rest on strictly observable foundations. Yet expectations are not observable. We cannot grasp them through direct ocular inspection. Therefore, even though they form central building blocks of our theories of rational decision-making, we often do not accept them as legitimate evidence in our empirical research.

Theoretically, we have neglected to build theories of rational political expectations. Instead of thinking systematically about how given structural and strategic contexts translate into actor perceptions, we have tended to treat political expectations as mere epiphenomena, as simple and direct reflections of contextual factors. Scholars of the political economy of regimes, for instance, derive actor perceptions from the objective distribution of material resources. Social groups, they assume, feel threatened by others are believed to have an objective interest in exploiting them and the means to do so (Boix 2003). In the absence of explicit theories of expectation formation, institutional expectations themselves tend to drop out of sight. Their presence is assumed, rather than established.⁷

Politically, we have failed to understand that uncertainty is a fundamental condition of authoritarian politics, yet also a central object of struggle. We have treated it as an externally given parameter, rather than comprehending it as endogenous to political conflict. As mentioned before, actor-centered transition studies tend to grant institutional uncertainties a place of pride. The very notion of regime transitions rests on the presence of “extraordinary uncertainty” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 3). Yet, transition scholars do not study the political dynamics that *lead* to the emergence of regime uncertainties, but the political dynamics that *follow* from the emergence of regime uncertainties. Their research interest sets in the moment institutional uncertainties set in, not before. Often the origins of regime uncertainties lie in elite splits, yet the origins of elite splits lie in the dark. They antecede the research interest of transition studies. If we wish to treat authoritarian insecurity seriously, we need to endogenize it, rather than externalize it.

Summing up: Political regimes, like other institutions, contain the uncertainty of the future by stabilizing social expectations. Despite their air of exotic abstraction, institutional uncertainties form the core of concepts that form the core of contemporary regime studies. They are the theoretical air we breathe even when we are not aware of it. Nevertheless, the comparative study of political regimes tends to treat institutional uncertainty as either epiphenomenal or exogenous. I propose to treat it, by contrast, as endogenous, as purposeful object of political struggle. The question then is: If institutional expectations are the foundations of institutional stability – which are the foundations of stable expectations?

Layers of Uncertainty

Political expectations are often unstable. They are a soft “tissue that can easily tear” (Kurzman 2004: 171). Edifices of interlocking expectations are fragile social constructions that may collapse like a house of cards when fissures appear in their self-sustaining foundations. Political regimes may look inevitable one day and on the brink of collapse a couple the day after. Only months before it fell, the demise of the Iranian monarchy presided by Shah Reza Pahlavi seemed “unthinkable” even to those who opposed it (Kurzman 2004). In the velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe, the iron cage of expectations about the solidity of political realities in the Socialist Bloc started to crumble like rotten wood when the Polish citizenry voted the Communist party out of power in June 1989 and a non-Communist government took office two months later. In the wave of mass protest and regime change that shook the Arab region in 2011, a cascade of contingent events in Tunisia, triggered by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a despairing street vendor, was sufficient to shake up libraries of well-informed resignation regarding the unassailable stability of Arab autocracies.

Though potentially unstable, political expectations need not be idiosyncratic. If they were, we would have to renounce the ambition of explaining them in general ways. If we wish to build a theory of rational expectations we need to assume that expectation rise and fall in systematic ways. We need to assume that political actors are able to form *convergent expectations* about the future behavior of others to the extent that their environment provides clear clues – that is, clearly visible and clearly relevant clues. If contextual information is scarce and contradictory, actor expectations will be undefined and contradictory. If it is abundant and consistent, their expectations can be strong and convergent (assuming they possess similar levels of information and use them on the basis of similar causal models).⁸

At a high level of abstraction, it is easy to posit three broad conditions that sustain institutional equilibria. Institutions appear safe and secure as long as three generic conditions hold: (a) all actors involved behave and are seen to behave according to institutional prescriptions, (b) their inner motives and external contexts support and are seen to

support their continuing compliance with institutional prescriptions, and (c) those actors who are seen to violate institutional imperatives, or are seen to possess good reasons for doing so in the future, are too few or too powerless to affect the overall institutional equilibrium.

- a) *Behavioral compliance.* If all actors comply with the behavioral imperatives of an institution, their observable compliance serves as prima facie evidence of institutional strength.⁹ Such behavioral benchmarks serve well to assess the strength of institutions where the imperatives of institutions are clear and consensual. When people start arguing about the practical implications of institutional rules, when they start testing and contesting the boundaries between the permissible and the forbidden, the very definition of rule-conforming behavior turns problematic. While institutional observance is a matter of institutional strength, its observation is a matter of institutional clarity. However, to assess the strength of institutions we cannot look at compliance alone. We also need to assess causal relations.
- b) *Conditions of compliance.* On the one hand, we need to ask about the inner and external conditions that sustain open compliance. If people continue to perform the outward movements that conform with institutional requirements, but either possess strong inner motives or face strong external pressures for abandoning their conformism (as soon as others do), we cannot trust the outward appearance of institutional strength. For instance, a repressive and corrupt authoritarian regime that enriches its elites and impoverishes its citizens may well be able to maintain social peace over long stretches of time. Yet we do not trust the surface of tranquility if we know that pressures are accumulating underneath and may erupt at any moment. We often describe such regimes with metaphors that express the apparent incongruence between observable realities and underlying conditions: time bombs, powder barrels, pressure chambers.
- c) *Consequences of non-compliance.* On the other hand, we need to ask about the institutional effects non-compliance is likely to produce. Threats are a function of institutional vulnerabilities as much as of behavioral challenges. Although institutions can be sensitive to minute alterations in their effectiveness, institutional equilibria generally do not require absolute compliance, only “generalized” compliance. They process dissidence, allow for exceptions. The thresholds at which exceptions from the rule start affecting the rule, rather than confirming it, are fuzzy. Still, as long as exceptions remain exceptional, rather than symptomatic of more general trends of institutional subversion, we can observe them without doubting the general effectiveness of prevalent institutions. For instance, if we hold a political regime to be consolidated when “all relevant actors” abstain

from political violence, consolidation does not demand the complete cessation of political violence. It is compatible with violent incursions by actors we deem to be irrelevant as they are incapable of disturbing the institutional equilibrium.

In sum, to assess the strength of institutions, we need to survey observable patterns of interaction. Yet attention to behavioral compliance is not enough. We also need to know something about its probable causes and likely consequences. Since present compliance may be a poor predictor of future compliance, we need to examine its underlying conditions. And since institutions can absorb certain levels of non-compliance, we need to examine their vulnerability to behavioral challenges.

Collective Challenges

While social institutions like monogamy, club bowling, or rules of courtesy, may erode through the cumulative force of individual non-compliance, the replacement of political institutions usually requires some form of collective action. And so does their maintenance. Political institutions do not stand and fall with individual initiatives, but with collective efforts. As a rule, unless challengers are able to coordinate their assault on established political institutions, they are unlikely to topple them. And unless the advocates of the institutional status quo are able to coordinate their defensive efforts, they are unlikely to hold their positions. Collective actors and collective actions thus are the first thing to look at when we strive to assess the strength of political institutions. They are the observable anchors of assessments of institutional strength. Collective contention is the most proximate cause of institutional uncertainty, collective support the most proximate symptom of institutional strength. Individual actors and individual action remain important, but mainly as inputs for collective action.

[Figure 1.2 about here]

Figure 1.2 sums up my overall argument about the sources of institutional uncertainty. It depicts three causal layers of varying proximity to the outcome variable of institutional strength: societal structures, individual actors, and collective actors. The most distant sources of institutional uncertainty are societal structures in a broad sense: economic structures, state institutions, and cultural templates. These structural factors translate into individual-level variables: the identity of individuals, their resource endowments and interests, their normative commitments and cultural dispositions. Individual actors and actions translate into collective actors and collective actions. It is the latter which most directly affect the uncertainty of political institutions. Regimes are not threatened by societal structures nor (usually) by individual actors, but by collective challenges.

Causal Translations

Of course, causal “translations” between levels are not simple and determinate, but complex and contingent. Social structures do not translate mechanically into individual choices, which do not translate mechanically into collective choices, which do not translate mechanically into institutional dynamics. Given the length and complexity of the causal chain, all theories of regime stability and change must privilege some level of explanation over others. While some focus on direct causal relations between contiguous causal layers, others leapfrog intermediate layers and connect lower with more distant higher levels.

For example, among those who study *direct* causal relations, students of public opinion look at the relations between structural variables and individual attitudes, students of social movements at the relations between individual dispositions and collective contention, and students of political instability at the relations between collective conflict and institutional outcomes.¹⁰

Among those who study *distant* causal relations, students of socio-economic modernization analyze the relation between broad societal structures and institutional outcomes, leapfrogging individual as well as collective actors. Similarly, students of institutional capacities analyze the strength of state institutions at the bottom of my causal chain as well as the strength of regime institutions at its top, bracketing actor-related variables in between. Students of cultural modernization analyze the relation between broad cultural patterns and institutional outcomes, leapfrogging the level of collective action. Students of political revolutions focus on the relation between state structures and organized violence, circumventing the level of individual choice.¹¹

However. When structural or institutional theorists choose to skip the contingent world of individual and collective action, they choose to skip the micro-foundations of their theories. As one is tempted to note from the viewpoint of methodological individualism, leaving their theories without micro-foundations they leave them without foundations. My actor-based understanding of regime threats is meant to provide such foundations.

Types of Threat

Threats are potential sources of institutional uncertainty. The notion of regime threats, more concretely, designates collective actions that carry the potential of destabilizing a political regime, or more obliquely, of setting into motion corrosive interactive dynamics that may end up destabilizing the regime. With destabilization meaning: the creation of widespread uncertainty about the sustainability of the regime. Exceptionally, actions of isolated individuals can make a difference, too, as in some cases of tyrannicide or self-immolation.

Generally, though, it is only through coordinated action that dissidents can generate serious uncertainty about the institutional solidity of regimes. Not all collective challenges are equal, however. They differ in their targets, their origins, and their means.

- *Objects of Threat.* In comparative study of political regimes, it has become common to start the enterprise of theory building, not with the functional requirements of political systems, but with the functional requirements of individual rulers. According to the emergent general (and in its generality persuasive) standard account, rulers, whether presiding a pre-modern hierarchical state or the complex bureaucratic structures of a modern state, have to resolve two fundamental challenges. Whatever the substantive goals they pursue, they have to secure their ability to govern (the challenge of *governance*) and they have to secure their continuity in government (the challenge of political *survival*).¹²

Threats to *governance* derive from structural *dependencies*: rulers depend on the “cooperation” of their subjects whom they require to contribute labor and taxes in order to develop and maintain structures of power. They typically originate in the refusal of societal actors to contribute required resources to the state. Threats to *survival* derive from structural *vulnerabilities*: rulers are vulnerable to acts of rebellion by actors whose “compliance” they require to keep authoritarian status quo going. They typically terminate in the refusal of armed actors to carry out the orders of government officials.

Securing political governance demands the construction of solid infrastructures of power, securing political survival the construction of solid alliances of power. Coordinated opposition actors may threaten either of the two projects. Although this book (like much of the literature) focuses on questions of regime continuity and leadership survival, we need to keep in mind that problems of governance and survival are mutually contaminating. If a government loses its capacity to govern, its hold on power turns fragile. If its continuity in power is put into question, its capacity to govern is bound to erode too.

- *Origins of Threat.* Institutional uncertainty may come from anywhere, the carriers of threat may be anywhere. Abstractly speaking, we can distinguish between vertical, horizontal, and external threats. Vertical threats originate from below (the citizenry), horizontal or lateral threats from within the ruling coalition (the elite), and external threats from without the national borders (the international community). Mass demonstrations and popular rebellions are typical instances of vertical threats, palace coups and military coups typical manifestations of lateral threats, and war and covert intervention

by foreign governments paradigmatic instances of external threats.

- *Means of Threat.* Threats differ in their sources as well as in their form. They may be peaceful or violent. If successful, they trigger transfers of power. Bloodless, peaceful transfers of power usually take place according to established rules of succession. Examples are elections, dynastic succession, or the consensual rotation of military junta members. Blood-stained, violent transfers of power usually take place in violation of formal or informal rules of succession. Examples are military coups, leadership assassination, or foreign invasion.¹³

If we combine the latter two dimensions, the identity of actors who threaten a regime and the means they deploy, we obtain a six-fold typology of threats to political survival, as depicted in Table 1.1. At times the boundaries between types of actors and instruments are less than razor sharp. Still, the typology provides a heuristic map that allows to situate the analytic concerns of this book: its focus on the challenges authoritarian elections may pose to authoritarian regimes involves a focus on peaceful threats from below.

[Table 1.1 about here]

The Interaction of Threats

Studies of democratic transitions have long been emphasizing the critical role lateral conflicts within the regime (elite splits) play in triggering the dynamics of regime change. As Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter famously asserted in their seminal 1986 essay, “there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime” (1986: 19). When the coherence of the ruling elite turns uncertain, the continuity of the regime turns uncertain. Subsequent studies have confirmed the empirical regularity that “most of the time the most serious challenge to dictators’ survival in office comes from high level allies, not from regime opponents” (Geddes 2005: 6). Consequently, much of the literature on the political economy of dictatorship focuses on horizontal, rather than either vertical or external threats.¹⁴ Yet, although horizontal threats follow their own, age-old logic of elite rivalries, they do not rise and fall in isolation. Threats interact. Threats from below, within, and without influence each other, and so do violent and peaceful threats.

Both concrete observations and general propositions about dynamic interdependencies between threats abound in the literature. For example: Evidence of mass support “enhances cooperation within the ruling coalition.” (Magaloni and Kicheli 2010: 128). Mass protests are often able to “force defections from the regime” (Beissinger 2009: 75). Under certain conditions, serious threats from below compel elites to cooperate (Slater 2010). The armed forces split in response to

citizen protests, and citizen protests respond to splits in the armed forces (Lee 2009). Rulers set up infrastructures of mass mobilization to counteract the threat of military coups (Geddes 2009). Discontented subnational elites stage citizens protests to extract concessions from the center (Robertson 2010). Structural dependencies on the external world affect domestic balances of power (Levitsky and Way 2006). The presence of international observers encourages opposition parties to boycott authoritarian elections (Beaulieu and Hyde 2009). In electoral autocracies, opposition challenges are often tame and lame unless prominent politicians defect from the ruling party (Langston 2006, van de Walle 2006). And so forth. Actors at various institutional locations watch each other, respond to each other, and expect each other to watch and respond. Managing interdependencies among threats forms a central part of regime struggles. While authoritarian rulers strive to interrupt the positive feedback between emergent threats, opposition actors work to reinforce it.

Inferential Uncertainty

If regime threats are collective actions that carry the potential of disrupting the institutional certainties of a regime, their diagnosis requires descriptive as well as causal inferences. Each of the layers of uncertainty depicted in Figure 1.2 above requires descriptive inferences, each of its connections causal inferences. Descriptively, we need to know basic facts about collective challenges: Who does what to whom? Causally, we need to estimate institutional effects: What do these actions do to the regime? How vulnerable is it to these actions? Do they scratch its institutional surface or shake its institutional foundations? The same applies to structural and individual factors that feed collective challenges. To anticipate their probable role in the genesis of regime threats we always need to gather facts and arrange them into some general picture (descriptive inference); and we need to evaluate their causal relevance for the emergence of collective dissidence (causal inference). In authoritarian regimes, all these inferences take place under conditions of structural opacity. In the language I wish to propose here: all estimations of institutional uncertainty take place under conditions of inferential uncertainty (which we may also call “informational” or “epistemic” uncertainty). Our knowledge about the uncertainty of authoritarian institutions is limited by the uncertainty of our knowledge about authoritarian institutions.

If we would ask a philosopher, she would explain us, patiently, as parents explain simple things to small children, that all our knowledge is uncertain. A sociologist, at a slightly lower level of abstraction, would inform us that the “self-observation” of modern societies is a perennial challenge, always tentative, incomplete, and contested. True enough. And still, profound differences exist between the relative transparency of democratic regimes and the structural opacity of authoritarian regimes. For all their internal variance, non-democratic

regimes impose much tighter limits, not only on what we know, but on what we *can* know.

The Game of Appearances

Despite occasional talk about the possible existence of liberal autocracies, authoritarian regimes are by definition oppressive: to larger or lesser degree, they suppress (in form or fact) civil liberties and political rights that define modern representative democracy. In democracies, citizens can talk politically and act politically without, in principle, further restraints than the renunciation of violence. In autocracies, they can't. Autocracies impose certain limits on what subjects can say and do, and they impose certain demands on what subjects must say and do. Some people will disregard these limits and demands, and they are likely to pay a prize for it. Others, perhaps most others, will respect them, to larger or lesser degrees. They will behave the way the regime demands and display outward signs of conformity. Yet, as their behavior is coerced, not free and voluntary, we do not know whether it conforms to inner convictions or not. The denial of liberty introduces a structural divorce between the observable behavior and the subjective world of personal desires, values, and beliefs. It generates systems of generalized theatricality. Everybody plays roles, wears masks, measures her words, calculates her deeds, or can be assumed to do so.

Non-democratic regimes differ in the demands they impose on their subjects. Notoriously, totalitarian regimes extract from their subjects visible signs of conformity in all walks of life, such as the extended arm, the wearing of swastikas, and the social segregation of Jews in Hitler's Germany. Non-totalitarian regimes, by contrast, often content themselves with suppressing dissent, rather than mobilizing loyalty. Non-democratic regimes also differ in the degree of violence they are prepared to unleash on their populations. While the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century acted like occupying forces against their own people and set up bureaucracies of murder against those they defined as enemies of the people,¹⁵ non-totalitarian regimes tend to be more selective and restrained in the political use of force.

The more demonstrations of public loyalty authoritarian regimes demand from their subjects and the more they are willing to back up these demands by force, the more they push everybody into pervasive "preference falsification" (Kuran 1995). And everybody means everybody, citizens as well as elites. The true beliefs of citizens as much as the true beliefs of elite members are locked up in a "black box" impenetrable to the authoritarian eye. Poor dictators. They yearn to be loved and feared, and end up confused and ignorant about the extent to which they are either loved or feared. This is the "dictator's paradox" (Wintrobe 1998), his irresolvable dilemma: his power and knowledge are inversely related. The more powerful he is, the more frightening to his subjects and his collaborators, the less he can know about those he rules over and those he rules with. Everybody is liable

to falsify everything in order to appease him, to save his skin, to be left alone, to advance in the hierarchy of authoritarian favors. Authoritarian regimes are grand theatres pretending to be grand realities.

No Way Out

Even though the structural opacity of authoritarian regimes is a widely accepted fact in the literature, authors often seem to suggest that rulers are able to overcome their informational dilemmas through a variety of institutional remedies. To open venues for the expression of discontent, they can, among other things, vary the degree of repression (Wintrobe 1998), establish single-party elections (Malesky and Schuler 2010), hold multiparty elections (Cox 2007), license private media (Debs 2007), or grant civil liberties (Robertson 2010). Happily, however, authoritarian rulers cannot resolve the inferential uncertainties that they themselves create.

Democratic societies have developed all kinds of instruments to observe themselves: census bureaus, central banks, statistical offices, maps and museums, mass media, contentious politics, social sciences, representative surveys, the Internet, space stations, psychoanalysis. In efforts of institutional mimesis, authoritarian regimes often use the same demoscopic instruments. Alas, in their hands, they are almost infallibly more fallible. Distinctively authoritarian institutions of data collection, like torture, denunciation, the secret police, or bureaucratic reporting systems about the “popular mood,” are no more reliable. They do not and cannot register attitudes, only self-protective behaviour observed by self-protective bureaucracies (see also Longerich 2009: L 732).¹⁶

In his uncertainty about the threats that are gathering to his sides and to his feet, it may not be much of a consolation to the dictator, but he is not alone. He is not alone in his relative ignorance. The typical king from the typical fairy tale changes dress and mingles among the people to learn what the people think about him. Yet “the people” themselves (individually) do not know what “the people” (collectively) think of their rulers. When authoritarian regimes shut down or restrict the public space, the institutional site of popular sovereignty (Habermas), they also shut down or restrict what we use to identify as “public opinion.” What is left is a disjointed collection of private opinions that are mutually ignorant of each other.

Triple Ignorance

Under these conditions of structural opacity, where all public behavior (except for acts of contentious heroism) appears as a product of the political regime, rather than an expression of inner motives,¹⁷ institutional expectations turn uncertain as their epistemic foundations are uncertain. Basic facts are uncertain, the general relevance of public facts is uncertain, and their causal relevance is uncertain.

- When actors observe the political landscape they suffer from *factual uncertainties*: What is going on here? What is the case? What happens in the hidden worlds of authoritarian rule, in the backstage of power, in the prison cells, in the living rooms, in private minds? How does the visible relate to the invisible?
- They also suffer from *conceptual uncertainties*: What is the meaning of what we see? How do local phenomena relate to general trends? How appearances relate to realities? How widespread are the signs of dissidence we observe? How reliable are the manifestations of conformity? What is the rule and what the exception? What are these cases of?
- While the observation and conceptualization of facts belong to the realm of descriptive inferences, causal inference is no less problematic. The formation of expectations about authoritarian institutions is also fraught by *causal uncertainties*: What follows from what we observe? Which are possible consequences? Which likely ones? How do societal structures affect individual calculations? How does individual behaviour translate into collective action? How do collective acts affect the strength of regime institutions?

Now, actors do not need to accept in passive resignation either the political realities or the inferential uncertainties that feed expectations of institutional uncertainty. In some sense they can't. Even when they decide to adopt an attitude of passive resignation, they actively collaborate in the reproduction of authoritarian realities and appearances, as Vaclav Havel famously analyzed in his essay on the symbolic (and thus very real) "power of the powerless" (1985). Even if they decide not to take an active part in either the reproduction or the subversion of regime realities, they cannot but take an active part in either the reproduction or the subversion of regime *appearances* – which are an important part of regime realities. The grand theatre of authoritarian rule puts everyone on stage.

Recapitulating: Like other institutions, political regimes are devices to stabilize social expectations. By creating expectations of continuity they reduce the uncertainty of future interactions. Strong regimes create strong certainties, weak regimes weak ones. In times of crises, institutional uncertainties escalate. Regime actors struggle to prevent such escalation, their opponents to provoke it. In this sense, regime struggles are struggles over institutional expectations. If, as posited above, these expectations are grounded in layers of facts and causal relations, and if these facts and causal relations are intrinsically opaque, then the struggle over political regimes is a struggle over factual and causal beliefs as much as over objective realities. All along the way from distant to proximate causes of regime strength, authoritarian actors face the twin challenge of containing threats *and* threat perceptions, their opponents the twin challenge of generating threats *and* threat perceptions.

Constructing Political Realities

For authoritarian rulers as well as their opponents, creating appearances is important, but controlling realities is even more important. Rulers need to demonstrate power, but also to exercise it. Although they need to manage threat perceptions, they need to handle genuine threats in the first place. Dissidents need to demonstrate fissures in the edifice of power, but also to create them. Although they need to shatter images of invulnerability, they need to exploit genuine vulnerabilities in the first place. Realities and appearances are interdependent and philosophers are bound to tell us that the light-minded distinction between the two does not withstand epistemological scrutiny. Still, it does not seem extravagant to claim that (paraphrasing Berger and Luckmann 1966) “the political construction of political realities” under authoritarian rule involves two simultaneous struggles: the struggle over authoritarian realities and the struggle over authoritarian appearances. I will first review the former and in the subsequent section say some words on the latter.

Managing Structures

Societal structures are remote causes of institutional uncertainty and almost by definition they are not susceptible to short-term manipulation. They are given and fixed, exogenous to the conflictive interplay between political actors. They are the heritage of external constraints authoritarian rulers encounter upon assuming office (Haber 2008). Structural variables are beyond the reach of opposition actors, yet authoritarian governments do have some leeway in shaping them. At the level of political elites, rulers often enjoy considerable margins of maneuver in choosing the winning coalitions that sustain their project of domination. By picking winners and losers, conceding and withdrawing favors, opening and closing access to power, they select structural attributes of the elites that surround and sustain them, such as their age, profession, ideology, ethnic membership, religion, and institutional origins.

At the wider societal level, structures are stickier. They are more likely to serve as parameters of authoritarian rule, rather than objects of authoritarian intervention. Few regimes have either the ambition or the power or the time to revolutionize the societies they pretend to govern. Totalitarian regimes have been the historical exception, rather than the rule. Stalin, to cite a prime example, did have the revolutionary agenda, the despotic power, and the leisure to subject his society to violent transformation. Having reached power over a peasant population by means of a proletarian revolution, he resolved the contradiction by abolishing the peasants, the only societal group that posed a structural threat to his claims of exclusive dominance (Figs 2007).

Of course, authoritarian regimes can also induce incremental, long-term structural changes through purposive policies in fields like public

education, rural development, and infrastructure development. In the case of long-lived regimes, profound structural changes tend to emerge as non-intended byproducts of their policies. For instance, when the Mexican revolution reached formal closure in 1917, the regime that claimed its heritage presided over a profoundly rural society. Seven decades later, when a protracted process of democratization was eating away the political pillars of the post-revolutionary regime, its societal pillars had been eroded long ago through protracted processes of industrialization and urbanization (see Schedler 2010).

Managing Individual Action

Individuals subject to authoritarian domination can situate themselves toward their political masters in manifold ways. They can choose from a wide spectrum of possibilities, ranging from active collaboration in violent repression to active resistance against violent repression. In between these poles lies the vast landscape of active adaptation. All three categories are broad and multicolored. *Collaboration*, to begin with, can take many forms. Individuals may collaborate with an authoritarian regime within or outside its institutions, within its civil bureaucracy or security apparatus, at high or low levels, in formal or informal, and in direct or indirect manners. *Resistance*, the other pole, wears many faces as well. Individuals may confront authoritarian rule through individual or collective acts, through peaceful, transgressive, or violent means, in open or covert manners, by aiming at the high center of power or its local peripheries. *Adaptation*, finally, is chameleonic by nature. Individuals may adapt to the realities of authoritarian governance by taking part in public rituals and official discourse, by applauding and falling silent at the right moments, by going into inner or outer exile, by ciphering or self-censoring their political disagreements.¹⁸ In rough accordance with this three-fold categorization of behavior, it is common to group individuals into three simple categories: the bad, the good, and the guilty – regime supporters, their opponents, and the silent masses in between.

These distinctions are often appropriate, although realities on the ground tend to be complex, especially in the murky middle, as people struggle to find their personal balances between acts of compliance and defiance. Their choices are often situational and their means of expression subtle (see Biermann 2009). Furthermore, the meaning of concrete actions, their precise location on the continuum between collaboration and resistance, depends on their context. First of all, it depends on the regime. Telling a political joke among neighbors may trigger prosecution in one regime, and no more than self-conscious, self-contained laughter in another. The meaning individual acts towards a regime possess depends on the meaning the regime attributes to these acts. Autocracies differ in where they draw the line, and how sharp a line they draw, between what they demand and what they tolerate and what they persecute.¹⁹

The same is true with respect to elite behavior. By definition, the members of the political and societal elite that sustain authoritarian governance are supportive players in the authoritarian game. Yet, the very definition of support, the political line that separates members of the governing coalition from opposition actors, differs from regime to regime. Often it is porous and shifting, open to processes of trial and error, or trial and terror. Lowering one's hands while everybody else continues to applaud the Great Leader may go unnoticed in one regime, and destroy a man's life in another.²⁰

The point being: Regimes prescribe and proscribe different things for their subjects and their elite allies. Yet whatever it is they wish individuals to do, or not to do, they will try to bring them to do, or not to do. Through any means at their disposition, be it violence, money, or persuasion. Opposition actors will work to frustrate their plans and get individuals to resist the coercive, material, and ideological enchantments of the regime. Above all, through their more modest means of moral appeal. Individual actions are objects of domination as well as targets of opposition. If the regime succeeds in extracting displays of loyalty and acquiescence from individuals, it is likely to succeed in suppressing collective challenges. If the opposition succeeds in encouraging acts of individual defiance, it can kindle hope of mobilizing collective challenges.

Managing Collective Action

Dissidence at the individual level does not translate mechanically into dissidence at the collective level. It only indicates the *potential* of generating collective contention. The crisscrossing efforts government and opposition undertake to influence individuals ultimately aim at either blocking or facilitating the coordination of individuals. To a large extent, the politics of collective action are the politics of either constraining or enabling the emergence of collective action. Yet, of course, managing collective challenges under authoritarian rule is not a purely preventive operation. It also involves the need to deal with manifest collective challenges.

Again, the range of societal actors and actions between the poles of collaboration and resistance is wide. The *continuum of collective actors* spans from pro-regime actors like single parties, paramilitary groups, and state-sponsored interest corporations to anti-regime actors like bowling clubs, dissident unions, and guerrilla organizations. The *continuum of collective actions* spans from pro-regime initiatives like state-sponsored pogroms, non-competitive elections, and propaganda campaigns to anti-regime initiatives like protest demonstrations, Samizdat publications, and revolutionary warfare. In the broad middle we find actors and actions that straddle the front lines, striving to preserve their political neutrality after having lost, inevitably, their political innocence. All these actors and actions are targets of “constructive” as well as “deconstructive” efforts by government and opposition actors. The former strive to strengthen the societal

infrastructure (as well as concrete manifestations) of collective regime support, while subverting the infrastructure (as well as concrete manifestations) of collective dissidence. The latter try to accomplish the opposite.

Constructing Political Appearances

Authoritarian governments use their powers to shape political realities. Inevitably, they also use them to shape political appearances. Given the structural opacity of authoritarian realities, rulers need to construct realities and to communicate them too. All their *acts of power* are simultaneous *performances of power*. They are acts of domination as well as acts of communication. Whatever rulers do, they do in front of multiple *audiences* – elites, citizens, opposition actors, and the international community – who are at once *objects* of their games of power and *spectators* of their displays of power. Even the most physical acts of cruelty and destruction carry symbolic messages. Even acts of secrecy and hiding address the watchful public. Whatever authoritarian rulers do and decide, sentencing dissidents to death or granting pardon, repressing or appeasing protest, building walls or expelling the discontented, they always make a point. They always tell something about themselves and their adversaries. Voluntarily or involuntarily.

The same holds for opposition actors. They mobilize resources to change political realities, but also to change political appearances. All their *acts of opposition* are simultaneous *performances of opposition*. Whatever it is opposition actors do, raising individual voices or gathering in large numbers, rioting in the streets or staying quiet, they always tell something about themselves and their adversaries.

In authoritarian regimes, both sides, government and opposition, face structural problems of information: How can they learn basic facts about political reality within a context that distorts all factual information? Authoritarian regimes often strive to overcome their congenital ignorance by establishing extensive bureaucracies of political observation. The link between authoritarian ignorance and surveillance is well known. What we tend to overlook by comparison is the link between authoritarian opacity and theatricality.

As a consequence of their endemic problems of information, authoritarian governments and their opposition face endemic *problems of credible communication*: How can they communicate in reliable and credible ways within a context that distorts and discredits all communication? How can they convey invisible realities to skeptical audiences who know nothing, except that they live in a system that encourages the generalized falsification of communication? How can they transmit unknown beliefs and preferences of citizens and elite members in such contexts of epistemic uncertainty? How can they produce credible symptoms of phenomena no one can see or prove? How can they bridge the chasm between backstage and front stage?

In the grand theater of authoritarian politics, all actors face the same generic challenge of emitting credible messages. Different actors need to tell different stories, though. They differ in the core messages they need to draft and deliver. In essence, elite members need to communicate their loyalty to the regime, citizens their proximity or distance to the regime, rulers the coherence and popularity of the regime, and opposition actors its fissures and lack of popular support. In other words, rulers and their allies strive to persuade their adversaries (as well as each other) that neither horizontal nor vertical threats exist. Opposition actors and their allies strive to persuade their adversaries (as well as each other) that both horizontal and vertical threats are boiling under the surface of authoritarian tranquility. Competing struggles over reality involve competing struggles over appearances.

Elite Performances

Being a member of good standing in the selected club of authoritarian regime elites is a tough assignment. It's not enough to carry a membership card in the ruling party, or an enchanting smile whenever the dictator passes by. The problem is: nothing is enough. Nothing is enough for sure. Membership in the elite – or whatever we call it, the inner circle, the winning coalition, the ruling alliance, the power block – is insecure. Those who are inside, as well as those who want to get inside, surpass each other in producing observable symptoms of loyalty, be it personal loyalty to the dictator or systemic loyalty to the regime.²¹ Yet they never know. Regimes may punish dissidence as well as demonstrations of loyalty they consider insufficient.²² The demands for loyal behavior change, the red lines of intolerable behavior shift. The will of the dictator is as inscrutable as the will of God. What is celebrated today can turn suspicious tomorrow.

In China's Cultural Revolution, for instance, being a "revisionist," "reactionary," or "counterrevolutionary," and thus a chosen victim of "red terror," was not a matter of ideology, political activism, social class, or anything discernible to the rational mind. It was an arbitrary designation according to shifting, opaque, unpredictable criteria. In the last instance, "only Mao himself could 'detect' revisionists, or, more accurately, decide who they were" (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006: L 738). Still, authoritarian theater scripts for the role of well-behaved elite member can remain stable over long stretches of time. In institutionalized regimes it is pretty clear what elite actors must do, and avoid to do, to eat from the tree of power. In post-revolutionary Mexico, for instance, the behavioral requirements of political success were straightforward: Cheer your boss, keep control within your own domain of power, and don't move if you want to remain in the picture.²³

Citizen Performances

Loyal elites have to play the role of loyal elites, and loyal subjects the role of loyal subjects. As a matter of fact, if it goes by the wishes of benevolent rulers, everybody has to play the role of loyal subjects. Cautious citizens, whatever their private convictions, are well advised to do so, as deviant conduct runs the risk of punishment. Successful regimes manage to make everyone perform on stage the outward movements it defines as observable signs of loyalty. Václav Havel's famous grocery vendor is a fine example. Along with the price tags for his fruit and vegetables, he places a call for proletarian concord: "Workers of the world, unite!" As the sign makes clear to everyone, the man is not a man of collective action, not a working class hero fighting to create a transnational labour movement, but a man of the system, someone trying to get along by doing what he expects is expected of him (in Communist Czechoslovakia). He signals his acquiescence to the demands of the regime as well as his impotence of doing otherwise. Through their public displays of deference, humble subjects collaborate in producing and reproducing the theatrical appearances demanded by the regime (see Havel 1985).

Nonconformists have a harder part to play. Unless they are heroes who speak their mind without fearing the consequences, they have to perform delicate balancing acts. They have to trace their personal path between the compromises they are ready to accept and the risks they are ready to accept. Often they maneuver to avoid being perceived as regime supporters, without running excessive risks of being prosecuted as regime enemies. During their first years in power, through waves of street terror, propaganda and state repression, the Nazis cowed the majority population into silent acquiescence to their politics of expelling citizens of Jewish descent from the national community, the state, culture, the economy, and the public space. Under the menace of fierce reprisals, people were unlikely to show their criticism of anti-Semitic prosecution openly. They took refuge in small gestures, such as ostentatiously ignoring the yellow stars Jewish Germans were forced to wear in public since September 1941. If they dared to voice their concerns to authorities, they often invoked arguments of national interest or economic expediency deemed legitimate by the regime (see Longerich 2006: esp. 176, L 3349, and 41, L 741).

Regime Performances

Through their proclamations and decisions, as well as their silences and omissions, autocrats send all kind of messages to their expectant audiences. By prosecuting peaceful dissidents, they trace the limits of tolerated behavior; by failing to prosecute armed gangs of regime supporters, they indicate the realms of sanctioned violence and impunity. By keeping their crimes secret, they project themselves as respectful members of the civilized world; by committing their crimes openly, they project themselves as resolute executioners of the

civilized world. By subsidizing food prizes, they show their generous concern for the people; by suffocating food riots, they show their willingness and capacity of repression. And so forth. Yet, among the many messages autocrats craft to project an image of strength, two are of paramount importance. (a) To keep horizontal threats at bay, authoritarian rulers need to convey an image of elite cohesion. (b) To keep vertical threats at bay, they need to convey an image of popular support. The management of threats involves the management of threat perceptions.

Staging elite cohesion. For long the regime literature has recognized the importance of elite cohesion to the stability of authoritarian regimes. As long as the ruling elite does not show any public fissures, it is almost impossible to tumble an authoritarian regime, even an apparently weak one (although its weakness is likely to induce such fissures). Inversely, as soon as the ruling elite starts to carry out its perennial rivalries in public, changing the regime turns possible, even when its infrastructural and repressive capacities are high (although its strength tends to discourage public rivalries). Yet, if regime crises emerge when regime elites split, when do regime splits emerge? Elite divisions do not fall from heaven. They are the work of actors. Nor are they burning meteorites whose nightly descent to earth we watch in awe. Elite splits are non-objective and non-obvious.

More often than not, it is not clear at all how cohesive the ruling class is, or how divided and divisible. Whether elites are divided, over what they divide, how relevant and serious their divisions are, is usually a matter of competing interpretations. And thus a matter of competing performances. The major pastime of opposition actors under authoritarian regimes is to speculate about splits within the regime. They watch it closely, register its gestures, read between the lines. Since splits spell change and change means hope, their interpretations often carry a good dose of wishful thinking – whose supreme expression lies in the silent desire that these speculations turn self-fulfilling: that by discerning hair splits within the elite they may actually be inducing serious fissures. Such expectations are easily self-defeating as regimes respond defensively, striving to extinguish the flames of elite division at their origins.

If opposition parties are the private detectives of elite fissures, authoritarian governments are the official propagandists of elite unity. To counter incessant speculations about elite conflicts, they need to craft public performances that allow them to deny their existence. A fine example is Cuba after the abdication of Fidel Castro. During the slow-motion succession to his brother Raúl, speculations flew high about possible changes arising from generational gaps, ideological conflict, and power struggles within the Communist party. The new commander-in-chief choked all anticipation of internal renewal by appointing a new politbureau of old-guard, hard-core revolutionaries. Resembling a military gerontocracy, the new government irradiates maximum cohesiveness, erasing even the faintest traces of internal

heterogeneity (see Hoffmann 2011: 14–16). Political change is not on the agenda, such shows of revolutionary unity tell. It lacks potential allies within the regime.

Staging public support. Just as they work to offer solid performances of elite unity, authoritarian regimes struggle to produce credible symptoms of popular support. Suppressing open dissent is one side of the equation, generating manifestations of open support is the other. The mass ceremonies staged by totalitarian regimes are well known: big numbers parading the streets, in military discipline and infantile enthusiasm, with flags and torches, chanting combative slogans and sentimental hymns, cheering to the words of their fatherly leaders. Carting thousands of well-functioning subjects onto public squares can be an impressive bureaucratic accomplishment. Yet, as official mass rallies tend to carry a certain artificial quality, authoritarian governments often stage more “spontaneous” expressions of “the popular will.” Sometimes they delegate violence to non-state actors who appear as authentic expressions of popular indignation, directing their regime-sponsored fury against regime-designated victims. The Nazis were experts in such theatrical performances of violent popular sentiment.²⁴ In a more peaceful mode, regimes turn civil society into an infrastructure of regime support. State corporatist regimes like post-revolutionary Mexico have done so, and contemporary regimes like Russia do so, though in a less coherent and institutionalized manner, when they organize social movements from above, quasi-governmental movements in support of regime policies (see Robertson 2010).

When authoritarian regimes succeed in extracting everyday manifestations of support from elites and citizens, be it through persuasion, corruption, or intimidation, they receive more than visible proofs of support. They receive proofs of power. They receive tokens of subordination whose private motives – enthusiasm or resignation, greed or fear – matter less than the public fact of compliance with the dictates of domination.

Opposition Performances

If the main theatrical challenge of authoritarian regimes is to demonstrate cohesion and legitimacy, the main theatrical task of opposition actors is to destroy the appearance of regime cohesion and legitimacy.

Scratching the image of elite unity. Opposition actors have little direct influence on the image of cohesion a regime presents in public. Moreover, the more hermetic the regime, the more difficult it is to crack it open from the outside. To scratch the propagandistic surface of elite unity, dissidents often cannot do much more than try to redefine existing cleavage structures and bet on the self-fulfilling force of their discursive interventions. On the one hand, they can exaggerate existing or potential divisions within the regime, in the

hope of actually deepening or creating them. The politics of rumor. On the other hand, they can downplay the differences that separate themselves from selected regime actors, in the hope of actually attenuating them. The politics of alliances.

As it makes little sense creating divisions within the regime without building bridges towards the regime (unless one expects it to collapse and wither away miraculously), the politics of alliances is crucial. Alliance builders within the opposition treat selected regime actors as allies (or potential allies) in the hope of actually turning them into their allies. They can do so by introducing moral distinctions between regime actors according to their proximity to the dictator or their involvement in human rights violations and by offering negotiations to compromising actors and future benefits to defectors. To the extent that they succeed in creating widespread expectations that regime actors will respond positively to their overtures, these expectations may become self-fulfilling and induce regime actors to actually switch sides. The initiation of bandwagon effects is a publicity stunt. By shattering the image of elite unity, opposition actors shatter the mechanisms of elite unity.

Scratching the image of popular support. Legitimacy cannot be produced by administrative decree. A regime can offer reasons for its acceptance, but it cannot make people accept them. What they can produce by decree, if they possess the requisite infrastructural and coercive powers, is behavioral acquiescence. They can make people comply with the behavioral demands they impose on them as observable signs of their political conformity. Regimes cannot make people believe, but they can make them behave, and herewith create the outward appearance of belief. Opposition actors need to upset the mise-en-scene of popular support created by behavioral conformity.

In regimes that ban opposition and claim a monopoly of popular representation, even singular acts of defiance can be important in demonstrating the existence of dissent. The mere act of making opposition visible may tear the illusion of unanimity. In more open regimes that concede spaces of political pluralism and admit opposition, the main challenge is not to document the *existence* of dissidence, but its *strength*. To the extent that democratic legitimacy dominates official discourse, government and opposition compete over numbers and their significance. Who mobilizes larger numbers in the streets, obtains larger approval ratings at the polls, obtains larger vote shares in manipulated elections? And what do these numbers mean under given limitations of political liberty?²⁵

The Hermeneutics of Authoritarianism

Sending proper messages does not guarantee their proper reception. Just as authoritarian governments and opposition actors compete in transmitting messages to domestic and external audiences, they compete in deciphering these messages. Everybody is playing theater

and everybody is watching theater and trying to make sense of it. Under reigning conditions of opacity, everything is subject to competing interpretation: facts, frames, and consequences. (a) Factual claims are controversial: What is the case? What is real and what apparent? What does the surface of observable phenomena tell us about underlying realities? (b) Concept applications are controversial: How typical or exceptional are the cases we observe? What are they cases of? Which are appropriate conceptual frames? (c) Causal inferences are controversial: What follows? How relevant are established facts? What do they matter for? Actors strive to influence public perceptions on these three levels of facts, conceptualizations, and predictions. The party who gains acceptance for its preferred interpretation is the one who wins the contest over public perceptions. In the last instance, it is the competitive struggle over interpretations that determines the strength of regimes: their degree of institutional uncertainty.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have outlined a rather abstract and complex framework for the study of authoritarian regimes. To resume and reformulate its key propositions:

- 1) Institutions are interlocking sets of expectations. Strong institutions provide strong and convergent expectations about the future behavior of actors. They are sources of certainty. Weak institutions provide weak and conflicting expectations. They are sources of uncertainty.
- 2) Institutions structure both conflict and attract conflict. They are parameters of choice as well as objects of contention. Given their contested nature, they are not self-reproductive. The defenders of institutions need to invest in their maintenance, their adversaries in their subversion. Institutional strength is not a matter of inertia or self-sustaining equilibria, but the product of continual struggles.
- 3) Political regimes are institutions. To strengthen them, actors have to create expectations of continuity, to debilitate them, expectations of change. The struggle over regime strength is a struggle over institutional uncertainties.
- 4) Collective compliance is the most proximate source of regime strength. Its deepest, most distant sources lie in structural factors which translate (imperfectly) into individual actions which translate (imperfectly) into collective actions. Collective challenges pose the most immediate threats to authoritarian regimes. They may arise from within (“lateral threats”), below (“vertical treats”), or outside (“external threats”). Containing them represents the prime imperative of authoritarian survival,

generating them the elementary task of anti-authoritarian opposition.

- 5) Authoritarianism breeds theatricality. Given the systematic distortion of public communication they induce by suppressing civil liberties and political rights, authoritarian regimes suffer from deep epistemic uncertainties. Basic facts, their conceptual import, and their causal relevance are unclear and controversial. These structural opacities introduce an ineluctable theatrical element into authoritarian politics: Actors need to construct empirical realities, but also to communicate them. They need to create facts and to shape perceptions. When they exercise power as much as when they oppose power, actors stage authoritarian realities in front of skeptical audiences. While theater, one might say, is inherent to politics, it is constitutive to authoritarian politics. The game of authoritarian politics is a game of political appearances.

No doubt, taking “the politics of uncertainty” seriously is a demanding enterprise. Both institutional and epistemic uncertainties are complex phenomena, volatile and elusive, hard to observe and even harder to measure. While actor perceptions and expectations form central pillars of our theories of regime politics, strong methodological traditions conspire against incorporating such non-behavioral, non-observable variables into our empirical research. Furthermore, developing strong theories about “rational expectations” is structurally difficult in structural contexts where information is scarce and unreliable and where actor expectations accordingly tend to be tentative and unstable.

Notes

- 1 Formal definitions of institutions tend to assume the functional role of institutions, yet commonly fail to make it explicit. Institutions are situated in a rich semantic field. Some authors define them through neighboring terms, such as rules, norms, constraints, and structures, that emphasize stability, regularity, and repetition. Others define them by their observable consequences as “regularized patterns of behavior” (Hall and Taylor 1996: 939). Still others include causal elements into their definitions. They point to epistemic, normative, and behavioral requirements of institutional effectiveness when they identify those rules as institutions that are widely known, widely valued, and widely practiced [add references].
- 2 Expected continuity is a defining attributes of strong institutions, but also a causal condition. Institutions are not only *defined* by interlocking expectations, but *sustained* by them. Expectations create expectations. They are self-reinforcing. Thus the vital importance for rulers of creating and recreating expectations of regime stability. They generate self-fulfilling prophecies. Just as expectations of regime instability do.
- 3 Although the literature on “regime consolidation” has focused on democratic regimes, scholars have begun applying the toolkit of “consolidology” to the study of “authoritarian consolidation.” See, for instance, the workshop on “Authoritarian Consolidation” held at the University of Duisburg in May 2009 (www.uni-due.de/autokon/Workshop.shtml).
- 4 The foundational text is Gordon Tullock’s *Autocracy* (1980). More recent contributions are Debs (2007), Folch-Escribà (2007), Geddes (1999), Gandhi (2008), Gandhi and Przeworski (2006 and 2007), Haber (2008), Magaloni (2006 and 2008), Svobik (2009), and Wintrobe (1998).
- 5 If authoritarian consolidation requires the absence of threats, their permanence implies the impossibility of consolidation.
- 6 See Schedler (2001) and Schedler and Sarsfield (2007).
- 7 In his book on contentious politics and state building in Southeast Asia, Dan Slater (2010) provides an outstanding example of systematic thinking about the structural bases of political expectations. Social and economic elites, he reasons, are unlikely to band together and invest into the construction of state infrastructural power unless they threatened by political conflicts that demand the protective hand (the iron fist) of the state. The question is under which conditions such common threat perceptions emerge that possess the power to coalesce political elites into defensive action. Elites tend to accept the sacrifices necessary to finance a strong state only when they perceive social conflict to be “endemic and unmanageable” (Slater 2010: 14). As Slater argues, such threat perceptions are likely to arise only when violent “class conflict afflicts urban areas and exacerbates communal tensions” (ibidem, emphases removed). Unless conflict unfolds along class cleavages, unless it turns violent, unless it moves from the countryside to the city, and unless it reinforces explosive ethnic tensions, social elites in 20th century Southeast Asia have been unlikely to form convergent perceptions of clear and imminent danger (see Slater 2010).
- 8 The macroeconomic theory of rational expectations, postulates that “economic transactors make unbiased forecasts on the basis of all the information available. This means that although forecasts may be right or wrong, agents do not make systematic forecasting errors” (see “rational expectations,” *A Dictionary of Finance and Banking*, eds. Jonathan Law and John Smullen, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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- 9 Of course, the sources of compliance may lie outside the institution in question. Legal rules, for instance, often do not create social behavior, but only reinforce prevalent patterns of behavior dictated by mores or self-interest.
- 10 [Add references].
- 11 [Add references].
- 12 See also Gandhi (2007: xvii–xviii) ... [add references].
- 13 In their Archigos dataset, Henk E. Goemans, Kristian Gleditsch, and Giacomo Chiozza similarly distinguish between “regular” (rule-based) and “irregular” (force-based) exits from power (2009).
- 14 Notable exceptions are Wintrobe (1998) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006).
- 15 I borrow the analogy of internal totalitarian repression with the logic of external occupation from Hannah Arendt (2004). Still, the Nazi’s may have treated Germany similar to occupied countries in the West, but never like the “bloodlands” in the East (Snyder 2010).
- 16 On the opacity of authoritarian regimes, see also Barros (2005), Hoffmann (2009: 231–232) ... [add references].
- 17 Of course, inner motives can be endogenous to regimes as well. Authoritarian governments often strive to mold the values and beliefs of their subjects and often they seem to be successful to certain (always uncertain) degrees.
- 18 Reflecting on the breadth and variety of dissidence under dictatorship, the Beit Lohamei Haghetaot Ghetto Fighters’ Museum in Western Galilee documents “Jewish resistance in all its forms and expressions: the attempt to carry on a meaningful existence under unbearable circumstances; the expressions of spiritual life, culture, and religion in a time of destruction; the maintenance of community life and activities of mutual assistance, clandestine schools, outlawed political organizations, underground documentary archives, rescue attempts, and finally, acts of armed resistance in the ghettos, camps, and partisan units” (www.gfh.org.il, accessed 14 October 2011). On the spectrum of individual and collective responses to authoritarian rule, see also Grafe (2009) and Sharp (2010: Appendix One).
- 19 Of course, they also differ in their means of silencing individual voices. Not all regimes would stitch a man’s mouth to prevent him from addressing his executioners. In 1976, in the last fluttering of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese worker Shi Yunfeng was condemned as “active counterrevolutionary” and led to his execution “drugged and with his lips sewn together with surgical thread so that he would not confuse his executioners by shouting revolutionary slogans” (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006: L 5076).
- 20 I am alluding to an episode narrated by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: At a district party conference, no one dared to stop a thundering standing ovation to comrade Stalin. After agonizing eleven minutes, “the director of the paper factory assumed a businesslike expression and sat down in his seat. And, oh, a miracle took place. Where had the universal, uninhibited, indescribable enthusiasm gone? To a man, everyone else stopped dead and sat down. They had been saved!” (1998: L 891). The man was arrested the same night and sentenced to ten years of imprisonment. His interrogator signed him off with solid advice: “Don’t ever be the first to stop applauding!” (L 895).

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- 21 Notoriously, courts and personal dictatorships are “sites of intense competition ... in servility and obedience whose rewards are tokens of royal notice: a nod, a precious smile, perhaps an envelope” (Kapuściński 2006: L 190).
- 22 In the civil war orchestrated by Mao Zedong under the grandiloquent title of “cultural revolution,” a school teacher “was sentenced ‘in accordance with the law’ to nine years in prison for having, among other crimes, written in his private diary that a certain Mao-quote gave him ‘boundless energy’, then changed that to ‘very much energy’.” (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006: L 3846).
- 23 The phrase “El que se mueve no sale en la foto” is attributed to Mexican union leader Fidel Velázquez (1900–1997).
- 24 See Longerich 2006: 59, L 1057; 75, L 1347–1364; 23–24, L 2296–2313.
- 25 The imperatives of public performance are most clearly discernible when they contradict the imperatives of utilitarian rationality. For instance, according to standard decision-theoretic assumptions, dissidents should mobilize protest under favorable conditions, when costs are low, expected benefits high, and success is within reach. At times, however, they mobilize under worst conditions, when costs are high, benefits nil, and failure is certain. It may still be rational for them to do so under communicative imperatives, when they need to establish a credible identity as genuine opposition actors, as in the early days of the Polish Committee for the Protection of Workers (KOR) of the 1970s (see Dietz 2011).

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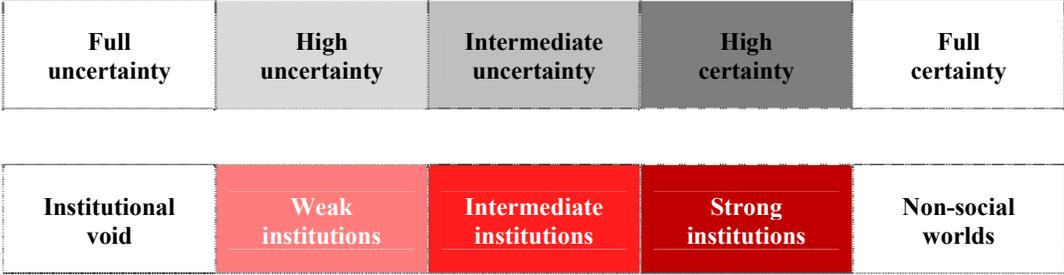
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Figure 1.1
The Continuum of Institutional Strength



Regime
crises

Competitive
regimes

Hegemonic
regimes

Figure 1.2
The Layered Sources of Regime Uncertainty

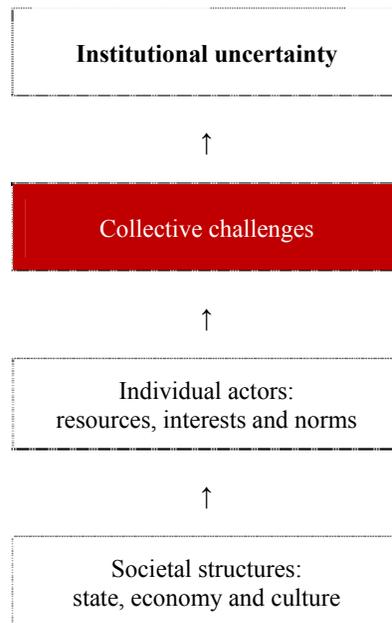


Table 1.1
A Typology of Regime Threats (with Examples)

	Peaceful threats	Violent threats
Lateral threats	Palace putsch	Military coup
Vertical threats	Electoral competition	Rebellion
External threats	Economic sanctions	War