Policy Brief

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Personal Rule and the Convergence of Governance

By Hisham Aidi

In recent years, personalist rule has spread around the world. As personalist rule gets upgraded and adopted across regions and regime-type, including in democracies, Africa and the Middle East are looking less exceptional, and mainstream academic theories are being challenged. The 2011 uprisings and their aftermath have destabilized social science thinking about Africa and the Middle East, creating an opportunity for fruitful cross-regional dialogue around concepts like personal rule, regime stability theory, state fragility, and identity politics, a conversation that is more urgent as Middle Eastern states are increasingly involved in the Horn of Africa.

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The recent announcement by Uganda's ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), that it had named Yoweri Museveni, the President since 1986, as its candidate for the 2026 elections has had analysts talking about the entrenchment of personalist authoritarianism in Africa. The concomitant publication of a book on the role of China in East Africa, and specifically Ugandan-Chinese relations,[1] has commentators talking about the Beijing's support of the Museveni regime and promoting autocracy across Africa. Personalist rule can be defined as a type of authoritarian governance. Other forms of autocratic governance revolve around single party structures or a military body.[2] In personalist regimes, rulers centralize power in their offices and establish a political order based on personal characteristics. As political scientists Jackson and Rosberg wrote almost four decades ago in a survey of personal rule in Africa: "Personal rule is an elitist political system composed of the privileged and powerful few in which the many are usually unmobilized, unorganized, and therefore relatively powerless to command the attention and action of government."[3] The academic consensus has long been that personal rule was unstable, inefficient and unsustainable, leading to erratic policymaking; a personalist polity was one where the "essential activity" is gaining access to the regime's patronage network, all of which breeds distrust, conspiracy, and coups, as was all too evident in Africa and the Middle East. To achieve longevity, it was argued, authoritarian regimes needed states institutions, such as single parties to allow them to expand their coalitional bases, coopt elites, and deliver patronage.[4] In recent years personalist rule has spread around the world. The trend towards personalism may be more pronounced in authoritarian countries, but it is also unfolding in democratic settings, as seen in the rise of Trump in the US, Orban in Hungary, and Erdogan in Turkey. In Europe, popular sentiment, partly in response to economic inequality and the migration crisis has increased demands for strong decisive leaders. As personal rule gets upgraded and adopted in democracies, not only are Africa and the Middle East looking less exceptional, but long-standing academic assumptions and theories are being unsettled.

The wave of protests that swept the African continent starting in the mid-2000s, and North Africa in 2011 has forced a rethinking of several academic concepts and hypotheses. To begin with, observers are realizing that what American political scientists termed the "Arab Spring" was part of a broader African phenomenon. The "Arab Spring" neologism not only implies that the uprisings were, were not driven by economic or social factors, but by an Arab nationalism or identitarianism, which is why the revolts allegedly didn't extend beyond the Arabic-speaking world borders. As scholars have noted, the North African revolts spread to over a dozen sub- Saharan African countries including Senegal, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Togo, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Zimbabwe.[5]

Recent research has demonstrated that the North African uprisings can be viewed as the peak of a continent-wide wave of protests that began in the mid 2000s often mobilizing outside traditional political channels. The protest movements of the last two decades have also spotlighted the specific mapping of area studies in Anglophone scholarships, showing how the definition of Africa and the Middle East has often simply reflected American strategic interests. This has meant that scholars were more likely to compare states within the Middle East region, say Jordan and Morocco because of regime-type and purported

1. https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/ugandan-agency-within-chinaafrica-relations-9781350255470/
2. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/03/23/the-rise-of-personalist-rule/
3. https://www.jstor.org/stable/421948
4. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0010414007313124
5. https://www.cmi.no/publications/4104-no-matter-how-long-the-winter

cultural similarities, rather than comparing single-party regimes across the so-called Saharan divide (for instance, comparing Algeria's FLN with Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF, Tanzania TANU, or ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe.) Similarly, oil-rich Gulf states were more likely to be examined in comparison to other rentier states in the MENA region, rather than oil rich states like Indonesia or Venezuela. Researchers are also more likely to compare Islamist movements within the Arabic-speaking, rarely including the Islamist movements of the Sahel (e.g., Mali) in the comparative study. This piece aims to look at how the 2011 uprisings have destabilized social science thinking about Africa and the Middle East, creating an opportunity for cross-regional dialogue around concepts like personal rule, regime stability theory, state fragility and identity politics, a conversation that is all the more urgent as Middle Eastern states are increasingly involved in the Horn of Africa.

Personal Rule

Personal autocracies, which can be defined as regimes where power is highly concentrated in the hands of a single individual, have increased sharply since the end of the Cold War. By one account, in 1980, personal regimes constituted 23% of all authoritarian states; today that figure has risen to 40% of all authoritarian regimes. The emergence of personalist rule in the 1950s was partly due to the geopolitical environment of the Cold War, and the exigencies of post-colonial state building which often required a centralized rule.[6] Since the 1970s, political scientists have argued that that personal rule is a losing political gambit, as leaders who do not face institutional constraints from a political party or military body are bound to adopt risky foreign policies, as seen in the reckless behavior of Idi Amin of Uganda or Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Personal rule, where leaders relied on their whim, also leads to erratic policymaking at the domestic level. As Jackson and Rosberg explained in 1984, "Institutional rules do not effectively govern the behavior of most leaders most of the time. Individuals do not perform political actions in an institutionally required way in the awareness that others expect, and that risks and difficulties would arise if they failed to do so. Political conduct is governed by the awareness that constitutional rules or administrative regulations can, and probably ought, to be evaded." As recently as 2016, analysts like commentators Moises Naim were arguing that highly personalized political systems were doomed. In *The End of Power* (2016), he observes, "Dictators, plutocrats, corporate behemoths, and the leaders of the great religions will continue to be an important feature of the global landscape and the defining factor in the lives of billions of people. But these megaplayers are more constrained in what they can do than they used to be in the past, and their hold on power is increasingly less secure."[7]

When the 2011 uprisings erupted in Tunisia and mass protest brought down heads of state in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, analysts saw this as evidence of the weakness of personalist rule, a mode of governance that thrived on hollow institutions and shell political parties. Yet despite the overthrow of these leaders, in recent years several regimes – republics and monarchies - have taken a personalist turn (for instance, Erdogan in Turley, Sisi in Egypt, and MBS in Saudi Arabia.) Heads of state have spurned executive constraints, dismissing institutions like legislators and political parties. In Egypt when Sisi came to power, following the ouster of Morsi in 2013, the general could have rebuilt Mubarak's ruling party, the National Democratic Party. He chose instead to introduce constitutional amendments in 2014 to stay in power until 2030. New laws were passed to enfeeble and place curbs on

6.   https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302735?journalCode=rwaq20

7.   https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/moises-naim/the-end-of-power/9780465065691/

civil society organizations and political parties such that Sisi established "unprecedented unilateral authority over both the state and society" that far exceeded what Mubarak had accomplished,"[8] abandoning the controlled pluralism of his predecessors. Sisi's personalist strategy reflects a skepticism of party-building, while MBS's rise shows a distrust of royal networking. More comparative research is needed to show how African personalist governance has evolved in recent decades in response to the protest movements of the new millennium, and how the personalist rule of today differs from the style of strongmen men like Haile Selassie and Robert Mugabe.

Transnational Autocracy

Scholars have long underscored the role of cross-border "autocracy promotion" in sustaining authoritarian regimes in Africa and the Middle East, referring to the Great Powers support for local regimes for geo-political and ideological reasons.[9] Of late analysts have been pointing to autocracy promotion by rising hegemons like Russia and China, and various Middle Eastern regional powers. For instance, in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Tehran has backed rulers and local elites in Syria and Lebanon, while Riyadh has done so in Bahrain, Egypt and Yemen. As Eva Bellin et al recently wrote, "autocracy promotion does not so much involve fostering a "positive" ideological project; China, for instance, has little interest in advancing Communist Party rule in the Gulf."[10] Autocracy promotion is more about empowering "non-democratic friends" for practical purposes, like protecting commercial interests and keeping rival states at bay. Political scientists have also come to distinguish between "autocracy promotion" meaning a broad support for authoritarianism versus "autocracy sponsorship," which denotes support for specific strategies of authoritarian (such as electoral fraud). Another related concept is "authoritarian diffusion" referring to the spread of repression tactics through mimesis or imitation, for instance, restrictions on NGOs and journalists, or shared technologies of surveillance, or the adoption of similar anti-terrorism legislation in the region used to target and label the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Finally, there's "authoritarian learning," a dimension of authoritarian diffusion where regimes adopt a strategy or style of rule deemed successful. Thus, recent research suggests that the revival and spread of personal politics "might very well be a product of learning among like-minded authoritarian leaders."[11]

These concepts that attempt to elucidate the international and transnational dimensions of authoritarianism in Africa and the Middle East, can explain the stalled democratic transitions of Tunisia and Sudan. As *The Washington Post* editorialized last year, "behind the power grabs in Sudan and Tunisia" lurked "the shadow of Gulf monarchies." Burhan's military takeover came shortly after talks with American envoy Jeffrey Feltman. The Biden administration embarrassed by Burhan's actions moved to freeze $700 million dollars in aid intended to support Sudan's transition. But Sudan quickly moved to replace American financial assistance with funds from the Gulf. In April 2019, Saudi Arabia and UAE pledged to send 3 billion in aid to Sudan. Analyst Jean-Baptiste Gallopin would write, "Financial support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE gave the generals crucial leeway to resist popular demands for civilian rule… The Emirates' covert financial flows subsequently earned them

8.   https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/merev/6/0/6_Vol.6_E-Art02/_html/-char/en

9.   https://www.rienner.com/title/Promoting_Authoritarianism_Abroad

10.   https://academic.oup.com/book/43030/chapter-abstract/361430705?redirectedFrom=fulltext

11.   https://pomeps.org/the-political-ecology-of-authoritarian-learning

unparalleled leverage across large segments the political spectrum, which helped the generals consolidate their power."[12] Al-Burhan would also receive multiple visits from Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince. In March 2020, al-Burhan visited Saudi Arabia where Bin Salman pledged the readiness of the Saudi investment fund to invest in Sudan. Revealingly, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE did not denounce al-Burhan's coup, but rather appealed for calm; they, on the other hand, actively cheered the Tunisian president's power grab. The Arab Troika supported Saied, in part because he was seen as a counter to the Islamist Ennahdha party.

 In their work on African statehood, Jackson and Rosberg famously distinguished between "juridical" and "empirical" sovereignty,[13] arguing that a number of African states were states in name only because, while they enjoy juridical sovereignty that is, enjoying international recognition and a seat at the UN, they lack the empirical Weberian state capacity: they do not control or have a monopoly over the means of violence within their territories – the classic definition of Weberian statehood. The implication of this argument was that domestically Western states exercised order over their territories, but internationally operated in an anarchical system, so that any threats they faced tended to emanate from the international or systemic level; for African states on the other hand, because they did not control their territories, it was the domestic situation that was anarchical and threatening, while the international system brought some semblance of order and security. This argument would also underpin Stephen David's theory of omni-balancing put forth to explain the alignment decisions of third world states. David agreed with the neo-realist assumption that the international system was anarchical, but he said held that realism erroneously assumed that states domestically had a monopoly over the use of violence and control over their territory. This assumption did not obtain in the Third World where many leaders faced internal threats and often made alliances to counter the internal threats that they faced Omni balancing therefore maintain that leaders will align in ways to contain domestic level threats. David accepts the classical realist view of human nature as being concerned with survival, saying that "the most powerful determinant of Third World alignment behavior is the rational calculation of Third World leaders as to which outside power is most likely to do what is necessary to keep them in power."[14]

Scholars of Africa and the Middle East have further developed this argument, also known as 'regime security theory,' claiming that leaders respond to a balance of threats which includes internal and external, material and ideological foes. A recent study by scholar May Darwich concludes that "regimes in the Middle East use alliances not just in the traditional sense as external defense pacts, but even more often for domestic regime security."[15] These alliances thus constitute "transnational coalitions" of ruling elites aimed at propping each other up against traditional external military adversaries, but also against challengers from within. As regards ideological threats, scholars have even come to speak of an "ideational security dilemma." *In Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (2014), Lawrence Rubine describes how states engage in "ideational balancing," whereby a regime will try to placate a domestic political threat stemming from a transnational ideology.

12.   https://pomeps.org/the-great-game-of-the-uae-and-saudi-arabia-in-sudan

13.   https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010277

14.   https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010472

15.   https://academic.oup.com/book/43030/chapter-abstract/361431402?redirectedFrom=fulltext

The 2011 uprisings and their aftermath have thus inspired a critique of international relations and alliance theory. As Qatar and UAE began building alliances in the Horn of Africa, it became evident that these small states were not engaging in bandwagoning and balancing as realist theory would predict, they were acting like regional powers. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) at one point was held up as the only formal multilateral Alliance in the region, but even that alliance seems to have splintered in the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, leading political scientists to suggest that "alignment" may be a more nuanced and appropriate descriptor of the shifting political.[16] Realignment and autocracy promotion are both evident in the East Africa, as various Middle Eastern states (Turkey Israel the Gulf states) attempt to gain a foothold in the Horn. Rivalries are playing out through proxy. The peace in Somalia, for instance, is precarious, maintained by an African Union mission made up of mostly Kenyan and Ethiopian troops, countries that have intervened in the past in Somalia. Since 2012, Somalia has been divided into federal states ruled by a Mogadishu-based central government. It's unclear how this equilibrium will be affected by the flow of rents from Gulf states. The government in Mogadishu is supported by Turkey and Qatar. Somaliland which declared independence in 1991 and is hoping to secede, has sought aid and investment from UAE – an alliance Mogadishu views as problematic, if not illegal. Analysts fear that Gulf power struggles playing out in Somalia will undermine the UN-led effort to build a Somali national army before the withdrawal of African Union peacekeepers in 2020. Mogadishu's view is that when foreign powers negotiate separate agreements with regional governments that could further weaken the central government. The state of Puntland has also aligned itself with the UAE-Saudi axis, while President Farmaajo of Somalia adopted a position of neutrality in the Gulf crisis.[17]

Convergence

In 2010, political scientist Francesco Cavatorta observed, that an odd "convergence of governance" was unfolding in international politics, as authoritarianism in the Arab world was being "upgraded," democracy elsewhere was being "downgraded."[18] Regimes were increasingly moving towards an in-between place of "competitive authoritarianism."[19] In the post-Cold War years, civil society activism and elections were seen as harbingers of an eventual democratization in North Africa and the Middle East, but state elites were actually using civil society organizations and elections as instruments of control such that several regimes were ending up as "liberalizing autocracies." Before 2011, Arab states were exhibiting a degree of pluralism and (rhetorical) respect for liberal rights, but the "core of political power" remained out of reach and unaccountable, making these rights purposeless. Thus, instead of democracy being the endpoint of political and institutional development there has been a "convergence of governance," as democracies slide to a point between democracy and authoritarianism, and meet "liberalizing autocracies" in a space where governments are unaccountable ad policy decisions are insulated from popular pressures.

16.   https://academic.oup.com/book/43030/chapter-abstract/361430411?redirectedFrom=fulltext

17.   https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/260-somalia-and-gulf-crisis

18.   https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232829537_The_Convergence_of_Governance_Upgrading_Authoritarianism_in_the_Arab_World_and_Downgrading_Democracy_Elsewhere

19.   https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232829537_The_Convergence_of_Governance_Upgrading_Authoritarianism_in_the_Arab_World_and_Downgrading_Democracy_Elsewhere

This convergence is alongside the de-politicization of populations who are voting and participating less in traditional institutions (like political parties or state-sponsored labor or rural corporatist organizations); people are instead retreating into civil society activism. The decline and belittling of political parties has created greater space for civil society, but also allowed for, what Cavatorta terms, the "presidentialization of politics" and greater personalist rule with leaders directly speaking to the base. One reason for this decline of political parties - or "death of partisanship," as it has been dubbed, has been the rise of unfettered capitalism (particularly financial liberalization) which has put state budgets and welfare bargains under extreme strain.[20] It's worth recalling that policies of austerity, structural adjustment, and the privatization of the state assets (including infrastructure) were implemented with the supported of parties of the left and the right. The rightward shift of political parties' - in the context of rising inequality – has discredited political parties, producing a degree of economic and political convergence between liberal democracies and liberal autocracies. It has also, as the populist surge in Latin America has shown, created a political void that has allowed for the rise of various non-state actors, and emboldened populist leaders of the left and the right. This convergence, along with the rise of personal rule, makes this a particularly opportune moment for cross regional analysis and a conversation between African and Middle East Studies.

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20.   https://drodrik.scholar.harvard.edu/publications/globalization-paradox-democracy-and-future-world-economy

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Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of Redeploying the State (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of Black Routes to Islam (Palgrave, 2009).

In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's Encarta Africana project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for Africana, The New African and ColorLines. More recently, his work has appeared in The Atlantic, Foreign Affairs, The New Yorker and Salon. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society. Aidi is the author most recently of Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course Conceptual Foundations of International Politics and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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