Personalism in Dictatorships: Disentangling the Process of Power Accumulation Over Time

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Abstract. Personalist rule is on the rise today. Many dictators have managed to usurp control of decision-making and political appointments at the expense of their top allies. This chapter examines the dynamics of personalism, a crucial underlying dimension of autocratic rule that varies across regimes and over time. We first review the extant literature on the origins and the (often negative) consequences of personalist rule, noting that personalism emerges when dictators have some advantage that allows them to escape elite control and the threat of a coup. Using the disaggregated components of Geddes et al.'s (2018) data for the 1946-2010 period, we then untangle the process of power concentration by empirically exploring the most common trajectories of personalism. We then link these observable pathways to regime characteristics and other factors in order to contribute to efforts at theory-building around the emergence and evolution of personalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

How did dictators such as Muammar Gaddafi, Idi Amin, Jean-Bédel Bokassa, Vladimir Putin, or Rafael Trujillo manage to accumulate so much personal power? What specific steps did they take to become strongmen and rule with little or no constraints? One of the most consequential processes in dictatorship is the personalization of power, that is, the accumulation of power in the hands of the leader at the expense of the support group. If successful, the process culminates in the ruler controlling all levers of political power. The military and the ruling party no longer operate independently of the leader, and they are marginalized to the point they cannot credibly constrain the leader's choices (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018). As Wright (2021: 2) claims, "[f]or formal institutions to structure political interaction that further accountability or constraint, humans, often organized into groups such as parties or militaries, must act collectively to enforce them." When institutions fail to play that role and the ability of individuals to act collectively is undermined, personalist dictators come to dominate the state apparatus and can exercise power with little restraint.

The trajectory opposite to personalism in autocracies is the emergence of institutionalized power-sharing (Svolik, 2012). Power-sharing mechanisms between the ruler and his support coalition give regime elites access to decision making and rents in credible and predictable ways. They often regulate succession rules and help coopt opposition groups. In such cases, allies and insiders retain the ability to credibly oust the dictator should he deviate from their bargain. As Meng (2020: 4) succinctly puts it, "[i]nstitutions that empower and identify specific challengers help to solve elite coordination problems, therefore better allowing them to hold incumbents accountable", and, therefore, she continues, "[i]nstitutionalization limits executive power by creating conditions that actually threaten the leader." It is worth noting, though, that the presence of formal institutions does not automatically involve effective power-sharing unless they are binding (and not simply rubber-stamp) and impose limits on executive power (Timoneda, 2020).

Figure 1. Evolution of personalism in dictatorships over time
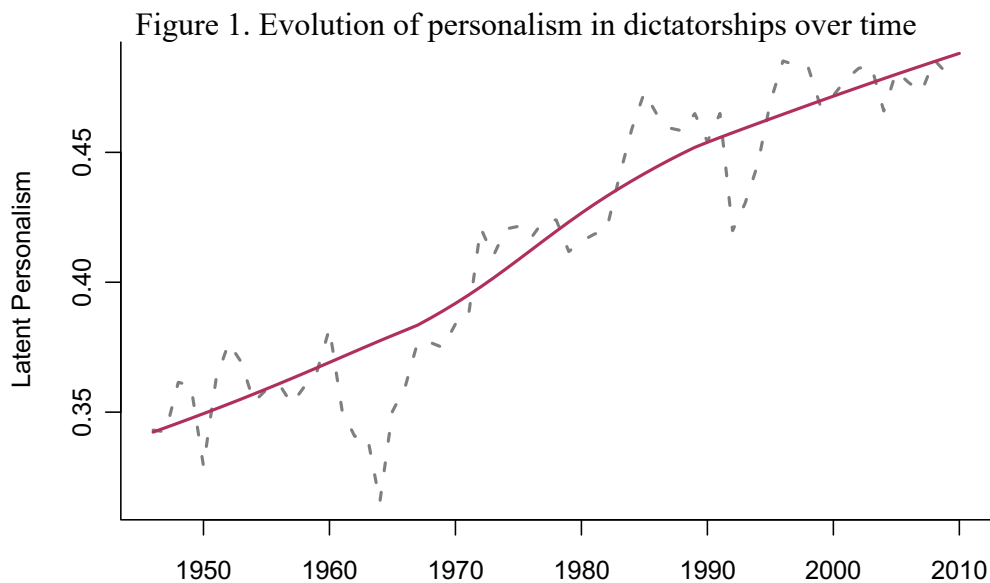
The importance of understanding the process of personalization lies in two related factors. First are the observed consequences of personalist rule. As scholars have repeatedly emphasized, personalist regimes have been linked to numerous disastrous political and economic outcomes. These include, most notably, higher levels of violent repression, a higher risk of internal and international conflict, nuclear proliferation, a higher likelihood of giving way to state failure upon collapse, and poor economic performance (Weeks, 2012; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2014; Way and Weeks, 2014; Frantz et al., 2020; Wright, 2008). The second factor is the growing importance of such regimes and the global rise in average personalism levels. Personalism is indeed on the rise and unconstrained autocrats can be found in almost every region of the world (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, 2017). Figure 1 shows the global average latent level of personalism in dictatorships from 1946 to 2010, using data from Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018).[1]

However, our knowledge on the specific steps that dictators take to personalize power and the timing of such maneuvers is rather limited. As Sinkkonen (2021: 1179) emphasizes, "when authoritarian leaders reach their power position, they must take active measures to stay there. Understanding this dynamism will help us reach a more comprehensive account of global trends in governance. Currently, dynamic changes within regimes such as fluctuations in the level of autocratization remain poorly conceptualized and measured." To shed some light in the dynamic process of power accumulation, this chapter first discusses the view of personalism as a latent characteristic present in *all* non-democratic regimes to varying degrees, as opposed to personalism being a fixed, time-invariant regime category. We then review the main works examining the emergence of personalist rule. The next section uses eight items indicating the leader's control over the security sector and the party to explore the most common pathways through which rulers manage to accumulate power.

2. PERSONALISM AND ITS MEASUREMENT: DIMENSION VS. CATEGORY

The conceptualization of personalism above entails that it can vary across regimes, dictators, and over time. We define personalism as the extent to which "the dictator has personal discretion and control over the key levers of power in his political system," and, hence, the extent to which dictators are unconstrained "by the institutions that can act as veto players in other dictatorships, especially the military high command and the ruling party executive committee" (Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018: 70-71). Personalism is thus interpreted as a characteristic that is present with different intensities in all types of authoritarian regimes and that can change throughout a dictator's tenure. That is, personalism is a time-varying characteristic of dictatorships. However, some initial classifications viewed personalist regimes as a separate time-invariant regime category (Geddes, 1999), which sparked some debate on the nature of the concept and its empirical implications (e.g., Svolik, 2012; Van den Bosch, 2015).

Comparative research on non-democratic regimes has traditionally relied on distinct categorical typologies to examine the consequences and behavior of different forms of autocratic rule and their propensity to breakdown and democratize. In order to capture heterogeneity among

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[1] See also Wright (2021). The time-varying personalism index is constructed using a two-parameter item response theory model. See below for further details of its eight components. The latent measure ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating higher personalism levels.

non-democracies, scholars have created several typologies (and datasets), which normally differ from each other in the specific dimension or feature that they consider the most relevant for distinguishing regimes from one another. Some focus on the identity or background of the effective leader (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland, 2010), others on the composition of elites and the institutions that control power (Geddes, 1999; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2014; Magaloni, 2008), others on how power is acquired and maintained (Hadenius and Teorell, 2007; Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius, 2013), and others on the presence of multiparty or semi-competitive elections, or other formal (nominally democratic) institutions (Diamond, 2002; Gandhi, 2008; Levitsky and Way, 2010). Still others have created fourfold typologies based on two dimensions: Whether the leader is constrained or not, and whether the leader and their support group are military or civilian (Lai and Slater, 2006; Weeks, 2014).

One of the typologies most frequently used in comparative politics is the one developed by Geddes (1999) –and later extended in Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014). The measure focuses on who or what group holds power ultimately. Her classification was the first to incorporate personalist regimes as a distinct ideal regime type alongside military, party-based regimes, and (in later work) monarchies. In the dataset, each non-democratic regime spell is coded as belonging to one of these four typologies for its entire duration. The main problem with regime categories and typologies (both by Geddes as well as others) is, according to Svolik (2012: 30), that they "are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive." Criticisms of such classifications have been especially strong for the case of the personalist category since the "classification judgments must weigh conceptually incommensurable aspects of authoritarian politics" Svolik (2012: 31). The steadiness of the personalist category within a given spell, Svolik continues, makes it "particularly difficult to objectively ascertain the occurrence and timing of a transition from a military or single-party dictatorship to a personalist one – primarily because each of the three types measures a different aspect of authoritarian politics."

Personalism, according to several scholars, should thus be interpreted as a feature of dictatorships to be operationalized separately as its own time-varying measure. The task, while now widely shared among scholars, still presents conceptual and measurement challenges. Scholars have made new efforts at measuring personalism as a distinct dimension or trait that can vary across regimes and time (Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius, 2013; Weeks, 2014; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018; Gandhi and Sumner, 2020; Wright, 2021). Initial efforts to capture this trait were very problematic since they relied on constraints on the executive (as measured in the Polity IV dataset) or on the duration of tenure to capture personalism (Magaloni, Chu, and Min, 2013; Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius, 2013). These are both problematic: The former only captures institutional constraints and regular limitations and exhibits little variation, while the latter is endogenous to the process of consolidation. Weeks (2014) uses Geddes' original (yes/no) questions used to create her typology to construct an index of personalism representing the proportion of yes answers. Her measure shows considerably little variation within leader spells. More comprehensive indicators have been recently created by Wright (2021) and Gandhi and Sumner (2020). They both look at specific actions taken by dictators aimed at reducing the constraints that the military and the support party pose to their rule. These actions are in turn used to produce an underlying level of personal power using item response theory models. Importantly for the goal of this chapter, namely, to examine the specific pathways of power accumulation, a series of case comparisons show that Geddes, Wright, and Frantz's (2018) and Wright's (2021)

data do a better job at documenting the steady rise of personalist power for numerous dictators (Chin et al., 2022).

3. EXTANT WORK: THE DETERMINANTS OF PERSONALISM

Dictators want to reduce their dependence on those groups that helped them seize power, and thus undermine their ability to replace them. Yet, elites have a strong interest in retaining (or even increasing) their influence to avoid being sidelined. Some dictators manage to usurp control of decision-making and political appointments at the expense of their top allies and launching organizations. In such contexts with opposing interests, elites can only prevent the ruler from doing so if they can retain the capacity to act collectively against the leader and, hence, credibly threaten to remove him should he behave opportunistically (Svolik, 2012; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018). The risk of elite coups is thus argued to be the main deterrent against power accumulation. Any increase in the dictator's personal power risks aggrieving elite members who see the risk of marginalization increase and their influence dwindle. Specifically, "[w]hen the members of the ruling coalition suspect that the dictator is making steps toward strengthening his position at their expense, they may stage a coup d'état in order to stop him" (Svolik, 2009: 479). Personalism can then emerge when the credibility of that threat is undermined.

Our understanding of the conditions under which some dictators manage to escape elite control and concentrate power is still relatively limited. Existing scholarly works point to several factors that can influence the balance of power between the ruler and the support coalition in favor of the former and can thus pave the way for the monopolization of power in the dictator's hands. These factors can be classified into domestic and international ones, and into structural and contextual ones.

Structural accounts have paid attention to time-invariant or slow-moving factors that may give dictators a bargaining advantage over elites. Recent accounts stress the importance of initial conditions and, hence, the initial power balance at the beginning of a regime. Meng (2020) argues that strong leaders, namely post-colonial founding presidents and those coming to power via a coup, are unlikely to institutionalize their regimes due to their higher popularity and control over security forces respectively.[2] Alternatively, Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) focus on the initial internal cohesion (or factionalism) of seizure groups. Specifically, they claim that factionalized elites cannot obstruct "the dictator's drive to concentrate power" due to their inability to coordinate, while, at the same time, "the dictator can bargain separately with each member of a factionalized seizure group," inducing competition and driving down the price of support (Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018: 78-79).

As for structural and (to a large extent) foreign factors, Fails (2019) shows that increases in oil rents lead to higher personalism levels. Ample unearned resources allow rulers to finance patronage networks and reduce the need to share power (Meng, 2020). Another crucial foreign factor concerns international support. The existence of credible support from foreign countries for the incumbent undermines the credibility of a coup threat by elites, so increasing the ruler's

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[2] Similarly, Sudduth (2017) claims that leaders who seize power via a coup are more likely to take steps to consolidate power (i.e., purges) since they have a new loyal coalition that forcefully replaces the existing one, so the elites' ability to coordinate diminishes temporarily.

advantage vis-à-vis them. Although not focusing directly on the multifaceted process of personalization, some authors posit that the influence of foreign countries can facilitate power consolidation. For example, Casey (2020) finds that Soviet sponsorship facilitated the adoption of coup prevention strategies in client regimes, while Boutton (2019) shows that defense alliances make elite purges more likely as dictators anticipate military support.[3]

Research on contextual factors that can at least temporarily alter the internal power balance is much scarcer. One such factor that has been shown to have profound impacts on internal power dynamics is failed coups. Failed coups reshape the information environment and create both incentives and opportunities for the dictator to undermine elite control (Bokobza et al., 2022; Timoneda, Escribà-Folch, and Chin, Forthcoming). A failed attempt signals the existence of inside threats, which urges rulers to take action to prevent further challenges. Furthermore, after a failed coup the credibility and deterrent effect of elite threats is temporarily weakened.

However, several questions remain unanswered. On the one hand, a set of works has concentrated on the use of purges, giving possibly the impression that this is a first, swift, and essential (if not the only) step towards power consolidation. On the other, despite allowing for general theories about the rise and consequences of personalism, works using latent measures, by aggregating information from several indicators, cannot inform us about the specific steps dictators may take, what they do first, and how that may facilitate the next step. Consequently, we still know little about the specific steps that dictators follow to concentrate power and which factors influence those strategic decisions. In particular, we have a limited understanding of which actions or power grabs are chosen first under different circumstances, what sequences of actions are more common and more likely to be successful, and if any patterns in the pathways of personalism can be detected.

4. PATHWAYS TO POWER ACCUMULATION

Becoming a strongman is a challenging process. The dictator and the ruling coalition typically hold opposing interests in intra-regime bargains that shape the organizational configuration of the regime. As noted above, any move by the dictator intended to increase their personal power risks aggrieving elite members and trigger a backlash. What steps do dictators most often take? In this section, we exploit the several indicators used to construct Geddes, Wright, and Frantz's (GWF 2018) latent personalism index. There are eight constituent measures based on observable actions by dictators aimed at increasing their personal power relative to the support party (if one exists) and the military. In other words, these eight components describe the distribution of power within the regime. In particular, they indicate for every country-year identified as autocratic by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) whether the leader makes access to office dependent on personal loyalty (*office personalism*), the leader created a new support party after seizing power (*new party*), the ruler controls appointments to the party executive committee (*party exec committee*), the party executive committee is absent or is simply a rubber stamp for the leader's decisions (*party rubber*

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[3] Despite these insights and evidence, the impact of international factors on power personalization is under-researched.

stamp); and, concerning the security forces, whether the leader personally controls the security apparatus (*control sec apparatus*), the leader promotes officers loyal to himself or from his support group or forces officers from other groups to retire (*military promotion*), the leader creates paramilitary units, a president's guard, or a new security force loyal to himself (*paramilitary*), and, finally, whether the leader imprisons or kills officers from other groups without a fair trial (*military purges*).

4.1 Empirical Analysis

Our empirical analyses provide descriptive evidence of the different and most common pathways of power personalization in dictatorships between 1950 and 2010. We use a few key variables of interest from the aforementioned GWF data. First is the main measure of latent personalism for every dictator-year in the sample. Using an *Item Response Theory* (IRT) model, Wright (2021) creates a continuous measure of personalism based on the eight manually coded categorical variables described above. While one of our innovations is to trace the evolution of personalism using the constituent measures, the overall measure of personalism is useful to understand the extent to which a dictator has concentrated power. We provide descriptive statistics using overall personalism throughout the analysis.

As stated, the personalism variable has eight constituent measures, which we divide into two groups of four. First is *civil* or *party* personalism, which captures how a dictator concentrated power within civilian government institutions and their support party. The four measures in this group are creating a *new party*, *office personalism*, *party rubber stamp* and *party executive committee*. The second category is *military* personalism, which includes variables that capture the dictator's personal grasp on the armed forces. Included in this category are *military purges*, *military promotions* based on loyalty, the creation of a *paramilitary* and attaining direct personal control over the *security apparatus*. We analyze the paths of personalism along these two dimensions for various reasons. One is conceptual clarity. It is intuitive to think that the dictator needs to deal with both party and military institutions, no matter its general makeup, and that the strategies for each might be different. It is also easy to allow military personalism to dominate the discussion, and we show that civilian personalization is also relevant. Lastly, a more practical reason is that the combinations of all possible paths increase exponentially with a larger set of options, making the presentation of the results more cumbersome. By presenting the results by civilian and military personalism, we simplify the presentation and make it more intuitive. At the end, we discuss the common paths between civil and military personalism.

Figure 2. Evolution of personalism within leader spells (left) and by category (right)
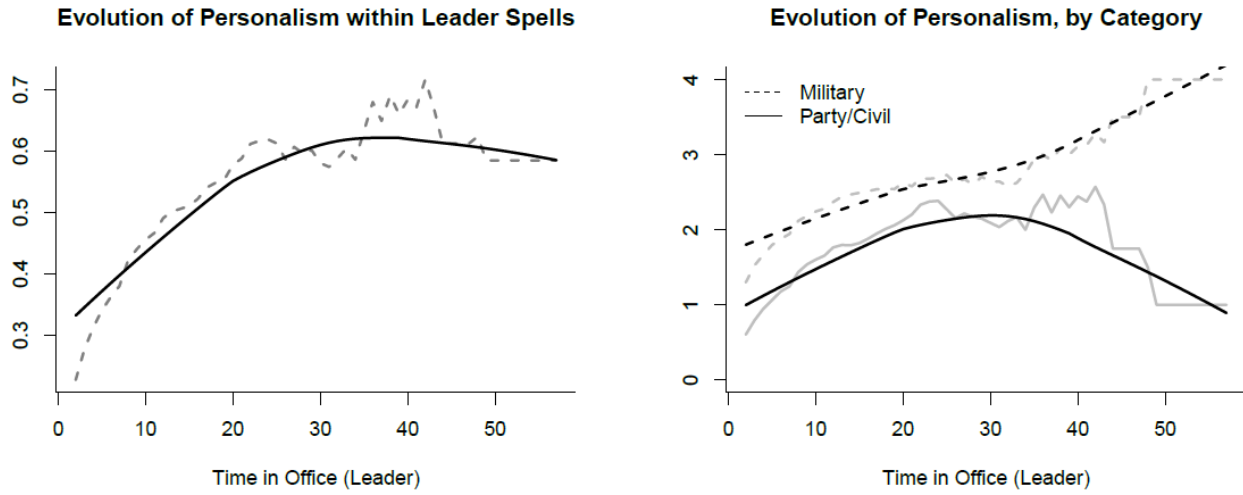

Lastly, we use other variables from the GWF data to describe the different leader spells and their chosen personalization pathways. These measures are (1) ideal regime types, (2) how the regime came to power – coup, election, rebellion, etc. – and (3) the seizure groups whose support brought the leader to power. We provide this information, along with tenure duration and level of personalism, for each of the personalization paths we identify below. Note also that our main unit of observation is the dictator-year, since personalism is conceptually related to the leader and their ability to concentrate power, not the regime. We use the GWF dataset to define dictators' time in office.

We begin with a general overview of the evolution of personalism over time. Figure 1 showed that personalism increased more or less steadily over time between 1950 and 2010. Figure 2 (left plot) captures the evolution of average personalism within leader spells. As expected, personalism increases rapidly on average during a leader's first years in office and slows down after 20 or so years in power. Note, however, that in the full sample, leaders remain in office for 8.81 years on average, and the median age of leader replacement is 5 years. It is therefore expected that leaders who have established themselves for longer exhibit higher levels of personal control. Figure 2 (right plot) shows the evolution of the military and civil/party personalism within leader spells. A trend emerges, namely, that new dictators focus on personalizing the military apparatus more than civil institutions and/or their party. The longest lasting regimes also reach the highest levels of military personalism but only personalize the civil side of their government to an extent. That said, during the first twenty years of rule, on average, both civil and military personalization increase in parallel. Indeed, for most autocrats, military and civil personalization of power go hand in hand for a majority of their rule.

Figure 3 plots the evolution of each of the eight sub-measures divided into civil (left) and military (right) personalism. In terms of civil personalism, autocrats focus most of their attention on loyalty appointments in positions of power within the government. Dictators also resort, though more moderately, to obtain personal control of the party apparatus. This can be seen in the *party*

rubberstamp and *executive committee* measures, which go hand in hand throughout a leader's tenure (left plot). Dictators therefore see the incentive early on to remove party figures as veto players. Fewer dictators create a support party, but there is a catch, as some dictators inherit a party and prefer to transform it to their image rather than create a new one.

Figure 3. Evolution of civil (left) and military personalism (right) by subcategory
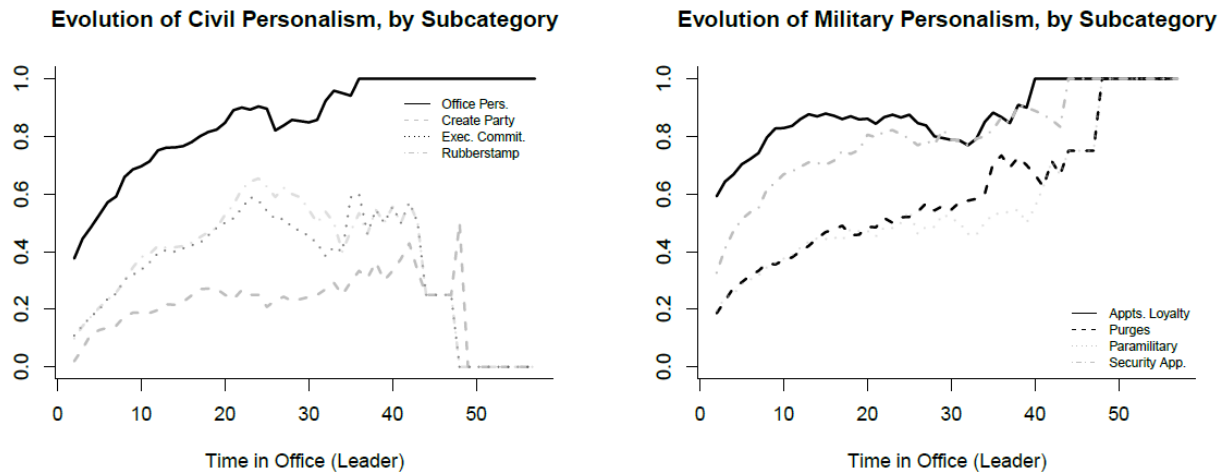
The move to make appointments based on loyalty on the civil side closely mirrors the evolution of loyalty appointments in the military (right plot, top line). Very early on, leaders focus on placing loyal elements within the military apparatus. Second, dictators also prioritize obtaining personal control of the security apparatus. Interestingly, both purges and the creation of a paramilitary unit happen less frequently at the beginning of a dictator's rule, but increase progressively overage throughout their tenure.

The evidence provided so far only begins to paint a picture of autocrats' decisions when it comes to tightening their personal grip on power. To shed more light on the specific sequences of power grabs, the alluvial plots in Figures 4 and 5 offer a visual pattern for the most common personalization paths. Each vertical bar shows the frequency of dictators that employed each personalization strategy in their first, second, and third personalization moves. The horizontal flows show the common *paths* of personalization, that is, how many dictators who made a given first move then make a second, and/or a third move. We see, for instance, that a majority of dictators who create a new party as their first personalizing move, then opt not to make any second moves, while a small fraction subsequently make all three other civil personalizing moves at the same time. Thus, Figure 4 shows the most common paths for civil (or party) personalization. As suggested by Figure 2, the most common first move by dictators is to make appointments based on loyalty within the party and government. As Table 1 shows, 166 dictators did this, a large majority, and 83.13 percent of these did it during the first year of their tenure. 17 rulers create a party as their first civil personalization move, while 13 move to control appointments to the party executive, and yet another 13 ensure that the party always follows their directives. Interestingly,

dictators whose first move is to personalize through loyalty appointments in mostly civil positions last an average of 12.61 years. Leaders who first ensure that the party solely rubber-stamps their decisions do so, on average, within 1.92 years of taking over, and 69.23 percent of leaders do it their first year. These leaders also enjoy a relatively lengthy tenure of about 11 years, on average. Getting to control appointments to the party's executive committee takes longer for dictators – on average 5.38 years after taking over, and only 46.15 percent manage to do it in their first year in power. Despite making this move later, these leaders do last significantly longer, 14 years on average, probably because there are fewer powerful elements within the party's top echelons to push for a takeover or coup. It is also likely combined with military personalization moves that aid consolidation.

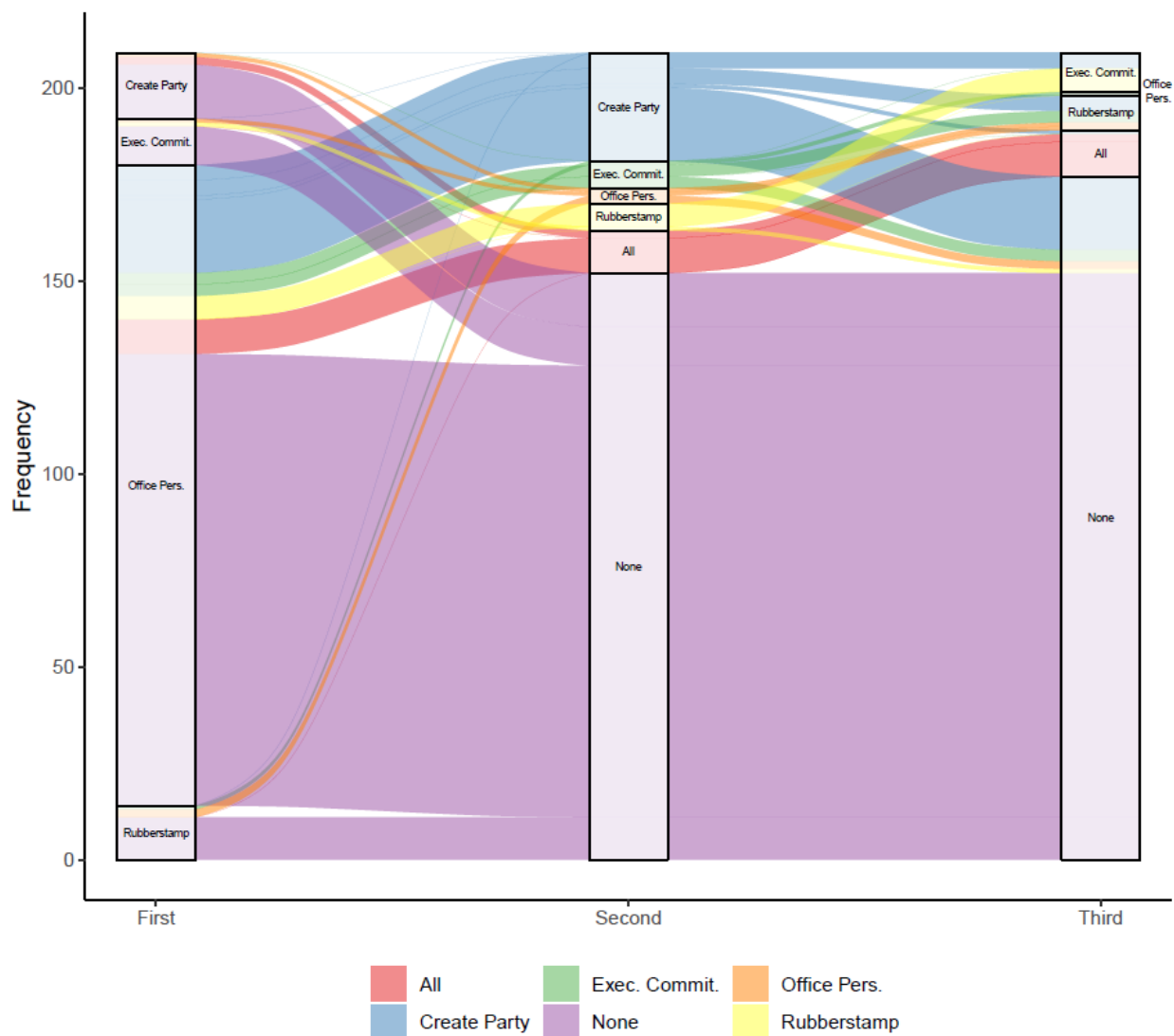Figure 4. Personalization decisions after first move, civil measures

Table 1. Breakdown of leader spells by first move (civil)

First move	Office Pers.	Create Party	Rubberstamp	Exec. Commit.
Number of Dictators	166	17	13	13
Mean time to first move	2.25	3.12	1.92	5.38
Max time to first move	28	9	7	31
Frequency at $t = 1$ (%)	83.13	23.53	69.23	46.15
Avg. Lifespan	12.61	8.18	11.08	14

Table 2. Regime and leader characteristics by first move (civil)

First move	Office Pers.	Create Party	Rubberstamp	Exec. Commit.
Personalism first 3 years	0.38	0.15	0.24	0.2
Personalism Avg. Spell	0.51	0.31	0.45	0.26
Most common reg. type	Personal	Military	Party	Party
Most common reg. type (%)	43.98	58.82	92.31	84.62
2nd most common reg. type	Party	Personal	Military	Military
2nd most common reg. type (%)	21.08	29.41	7.69	7.69
Most common seizure method	Coup	Coup	Coup	Rebellion
Most common seizure method (%)	36.14	76.47	53.85	46.15
2nd most common seizure method	Foreign	Foreign	Foreign	Coup
2nd most common seizure method (%)	16.87	17.65	30.77	23.08
Most common leader support group	Military	Military	Dom-party	Dom-party
Most common leader support group (%)	33.73	64.71	38.46	38.46
2nd most common leader support group	Hereditary	Foreign	Military	Insurgency
2nd most common leader support group (%)	16.27	17.65	38.46	23.08

Note: Dom-party = Dominant party.

Table 2 provides more information about dictator spells as a function of their first personalization choices. Leaders who first focus on loyalty appointments to civil positions exhibit higher levels of personalism already during the first three years of tenure –an average of 0.38. This is exactly at the mean of the overall personalism measure. The reason for this higher level of initial personalism is that these dictators appear to combine this civil move with one or two other military personalization acts (we will talk about this more later). These leaders then go on to have an average of 0.51 in latent personalism for the duration of their spells in power. As expected, a majority of these dictators are considered *personalist* (43.98 percent) in Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014). Most came to power via coup (36.14 percent) and the leader's main support group

is the military. Of the other three possible first civil personalism moves, only *rubberstamp* is associated with higher levels of personalism throughout the duration of the leader spell (0.45). These are mostly party-based regimes where the leader tries to gain personal control over party decisions. Also note that leaders who create a party as their first move are generally low in overall personalism both initially and throughout their time in office. These are mostly military dictators (58.82 percent) who create a civil support party when they come into office. Examples are Park Chung-Hee's Democratic Republican Party (DRP) in the Republic of Korea, founded shortly after his military takeover in 1961, and Than Shwe's Union Solidarity and Development Association, founded by the Burmese dictator in 1993 shortly after seizing power.

Based on the alluvial plot in Figure 4, we see that the most common second personalization move by dictators is to create a support party after making loyalty appointments. If the dictator inherited a party, it is equally likely that they will move to dominate party decisions (*rubberstamp*) or control appointments to the party executive (*partypers*), or will move to make at least two of these moves (see 'all' category). There are other minority paths, such as creating a party first and then making loyalty appointments, or controlling party decisions first and then making loyalty appointments. We provide specific data on each of these possible paths in Table 3.

Notably, 28 dictators created a support party after making loyalty appointments. They did so on average 6 years after the first move. These dictators lasted an average of 16 years and their overall personalism was 0.61 over the leader's tenure. Both of these figures are significantly above average when compared with the full sample of leader spells. A well-known example of this path to personalism was Cuba under Fidel Castro, who moved to make loyalty appointments to civil positions in year 1 (1959) and created the *Organizaciones Revolucionarias Integradas* in 1961, which brought the different revolutionary factions under the same umbrella and Castro's unquestioned leadership. Of the other paths, we want to note that leaders who inherited a party and quickly moved to make loyalty appointments lasted the longest when combined with a second move of fully controlling the party's decisions (rubberstamp) –a lifespan of almost 22 years on average for the 7 leaders that took this path. An example is Paraguay under Alfredo Stroessner, who made appointments based on loyalty in year 3 and moved to fully control his political party in year 13.

Table 3. Breakdown of leader spells by first and second moves (civil)

| Second Move	CREATE PARTY			
From (1st move)	Office Pers.	Create Party	Rubber	Party Ex. Com.
Number of Dictators	28	-	0	0
Mean time to second move	6.00	-	NA	NA
Avg. Lifespan	16.07	-	NA	NA
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.61	-	NA	NA
	Overall stats for 'Create Party' as Second Move			
Number of Dictators	28			
Mean time to second move	6.00			
Avg. Lifespan	16.07			
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.61			
Second Move	OFFICE PERSONALISM			
From (1st move)	Office Pers.	Create Party	Rubber	Party Ex. Com.
Number of Dictators	-	1	1	1
Mean time to second move	-	11	10	18
Avg. Lifespan	-	23	33	27
Avg. Personalism for Spell	-	0.4	0.48	0.26
	Overall stats for 'Office Personalism' as Second Move			
Number of Dictators	3			
Mean time to second move	18			
Avg. Lifespan	27.67			
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.39			
Second Move	PARTY RUBBERSTAMP			
From (1st move)	Office Pers.	Create Party	Rubber	Party Ex. Com.
Number of Dictators	7	-	-	2
Mean time to second move	9.24	-	-	5.39
Avg. Lifespan	21.86	-	-	18
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.52	-	-	0.33
	Overall stats for 'Party Rubberstamp' as Second Move			
Number of Dictators	8			
Mean time to second move	5.39			
Avg. Lifespan	23.25			
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.51			
Second Move	PARTY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE			
From (1st move)	Office Pers.	Create Party	Rubber	Party Ex. Com.
Number of Dictators	5	-	0	-
Mean time to second move	15.28	-	NA	-
Avg. Lifespan	23.2	-	NA	-
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.51	-	NA	-
	Overall stats for 'Party Executive Committee' as Second Move			
Number of Dictators	5			
Mean time to second move	15.28			
Avg. Lifespan	23.2			
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.51			
Second Move	NONE			
From (1st move)	Office Pers.	Create Party	Rubber	Party Ex. Com.
Number of Dictators	117	14	12	10
Mean time to second move	NA	NA	NA	NA
Avg. Lifespan	10.13	6.36	11.25	11.9
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.42	0.22	0.37	0.24
	Overall stats for 'None' as Second Move			
Number of Dictators	153			
Mean time to second move	NA			
Avg. Lifespan	9.99			
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.39			

Lastly, 153 dictators did not make a second civil personalization move after making the first one. The life expectancy of these dictatorial spells is lower compared to others, but it could also be due to the fact that leaders cannot personalize as much if their tenure is shorter. Interestingly, dictators who create a support party but do not move to personalize control of it only last a little over 6 years in power, on average.

Let us now examine how dictators personalize the security apparatus. Figure 5 shows the alluvial plot for the most common personalization paths for military sub-measures. The first –and potentially most relevant– finding is that military purges are one of the least common first personalization moves by dictators. In fact, only 7 (probably desperate) dictators used purges as their sole first move. As shown in Table 4, all of these 7 autocrats did so in their first year in power, but only lasted an average of 3.71 years in office, much below both the mean (8.8) and the median (5) of the distribution.

Conversely, a majority of leaders moved first to appoint loyalists within the military in order to build a loyal ruling coalition. This was the sole first move for 139 dictators, 84.17 percent of whom did so in their first year. As noted above, this pattern mirrors what we saw earlier with civil personalism, where the first move for most dictators was to control appointments to powerful government and party positions. The most common second move for this group of dictators are purges (see Table 6).

The second most common strategy for dictators is to first establish personal control over the security apparatus. This was, for instance, the path chosen by Houari Boumédiène in Algeria on the same day when he took power (Timoneda, Escribà-Folch, and Chin, 2021). 81 percent of leaders who first move to personally control the security apparatus do so in their first year in office and last 11.52 years in power, on average. Fewer dictators (10) proceed first to create a paramilitary organization.

Figure 5. Personalization decisions after first move, military measures
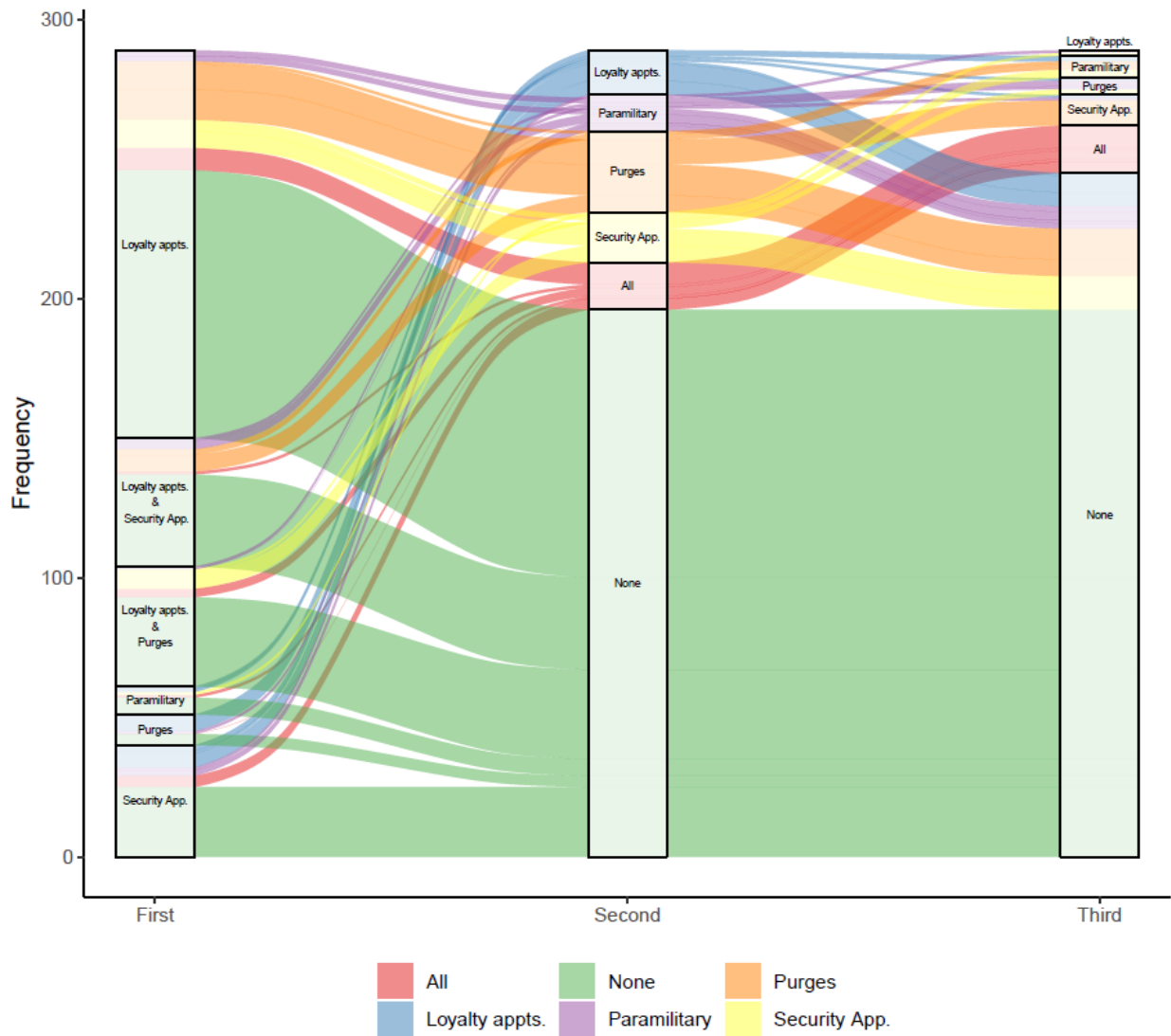
As opposed to the case of party control, dictators often make two simultaneous first moves when it comes to personalizing the security forces. The most common of these combinations are (1) loyalty appointments and control of the security apparatus and (2) loyalty appointments and purges.[4] Notice that loyalty appointments, when considering these combinations, make up an ever larger majority of the total set of dictator first moves. Also, some leaders do decide to purge right away but only do so when managing to simultaneously appoint loyalists within the military. 43 dictators pursued this strategy, and 95 percent made both moves in year 1 of their tenure. However,

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[4] There are other combinations but they represent a very small fraction of the total.

these two moves are not necessarily harbingers of prolonged rule, as the life expectancy of this group of dictators is on average 8.93 years. In fact, personally controlling the security apparatus produces better longevity, at 11.52 when it is the only first move and 12.5 years when combined with appointments on loyalty.

Table 4. Breakdown of leader spells by first move (military)

First move	Purges	Appts Loyalty	Paramil.	Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Purges
Number of Regimes	7	139	10	42	46	43
Mean time to first move	1	1.65	4.1	1.98	1.54	1.26
Max time to first move	1	12	21	25	10	8
Frequency at $t = 1$ (%)	100	84.17	70	80.95	91.3	95.35
Avg. Lifespan	3.71	9.33	12.50	11.52	12.50	8.93

Table 5 provides more detail about the dictators who choose each of these first six moves. Most of the regimes who purge right away have overall low levels of personalism (0.17 and 0.19), much below the overall mean (0.37). That is, they purge right away but do not have the time or opportunity to further accumulate power. Three dictators who only purged first were from military regimes and three others were from party-based regimes. A majority came to power via a coup (57 percent) and most of these dictators have the military as their main support group. When purges are combined with loyalty appointments, personalism does increase substantially over time, going up to 0.5 on average. An interesting finding is that leaders who sought to take over the security apparatus first most commonly came to power via an election, which probably means that their grasp over the military was more tenuous and such a move was necessary to minimize the risk of a coup. In line with Meng and Paine (2022), we observe that rebel regimes are not likely to make power grabs as they tend to mitigate the guardianship dilemma via credible power-sharing.

Table 5. Regime and leader characteristics by first move (military)

First move	Purges	Appts Loyalty	Paramil.	Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Purges
Personalism first 3 years	0.17	0.14	0.24	0.31	0.35	0.34
Personalism Avg. Spell	0.19	0.34	0.5	0.4	0.43	0.5
Most common reg. type	Military	Party	Military	Party	Party	Party
Most common reg. type (%)	42.86	45.32	30	47.62	41.3	58.14
2nd most common reg. type	Party	Military	Party	Personal	Personal	Military
2nd most common reg. type (%)	42.86	35.97	30	35.71	23.91	20.93
Most common seizure method	Coup	Coup	Coup	Election	Coup	Coup
Most common seizure method (%)	57.14	48.92	30	40.48	28.26	51.16
2nd most common seizure method	Uprising	Foreign	Rebellion	Coup	Foreign	Foreign
2nd most common seizure method (%)	28.57	17.99	30	19.05	19.57	20.93
Most common leader support group	Military	Military	Military	Dom-party	Military	Military
Most common leader support group (%)	71.43	48.2	30	33.33	26.09	51.16
2nd most common leader support group	Insurgency	Dom-party	Foreign	Prior dem.	Dom-party	Dom-party
2nd most common leader support group (%)	14.29	25.18	20	26.19	21.74	18.6

Note: Prior dem. = prior democracy; dom-party = dominant party.

Table 6. Breakdown of leader spells by first and second moves (military)

Second Move	PURGES					
From (1st move)	Purges	Appts Loyalty	Paramilitary	Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Purges
Number of Dictators	-	20	0	1	8	-
Mean time to second move	-	5.05	NA	2	8.62	-
Avg. Lifespan	-	14.05	NA	3	22.62	-
Avg. Personalism for Spell	-	0.46	NA	0.24	0.49	-
	Overall stats for 'Purges' as Second Move					
Number of Dictators	29					
Mean time to second move	5.93					
Avg. Lifespan	16.03					
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.47					
Second Move	APPOINTMENTS ON LOYALTY					
From (1st move)	Purges	Appts Loyalty	Paramilitary	Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Purges
Number of Dictators	2	-	2	8	-	-
Mean time to second move	3	-	9.5	3.5	-	-
Avg. Lifespan	4.5	-	27	18.62	-	-
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.16	-	0.62	0.47	-	-
	Overall stats for 'Appointments on Loyalty' as Second Move					
Number of Dictators	12					
Mean time to second move	3.50					
Avg. Lifespan	17.67					
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.49					
Second Move	PARAMILITARY					
From (1st move)	Purges	Appts Loyalty	Paramilitary	Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Purges
Number of Dictators	1	4	-	4	4	1
Mean time to second move	2	7.75	-	3.75	5.25	2
Avg. Lifespan	3	15	-	17.25	10.75	6
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.21	0.52	-	0.46	0.53	0.58
	Overall stats for 'Paramilitary' as Second Move					
Number of Dictators	14					
Mean time to second move	2					
Avg. Lifespan	12.93					
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.50					
Second Move	SECURITY APPARATUS					
From (1st move)	Purges	Appts Loyalty	Paramilitary	Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Purges
Number of Dictators	0	11	1	-	-	7
Mean time to second move	NA	6	2	-	-	3.29
Avg. Lifespan	NA	17.5	15	-	-	17
Avg. Personalism for Spell	NA	0.369	0.52	-	-	0.64
	Overall stats for 'Security Apparatus' as Second Move					
Number of Dictators	19					
Mean time to second move	4.79					
Avg. Lifespan	17.16					
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.48					
Second Move	NONE					
From (1st move)	Purges	Appts Loyalty	Paramilitary	Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Security App.	Appts Loyalty + Purges
Number of Dictators	4	96	6	25	33	32
Mean time to second move	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Avg. Lifespan	3.5	5.73	7	7.76	9.88	6.06
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.2	0.16	0.27	0.3	0.39	0.31
	Overall stats for 'None' as Second Move					
Number of Dictators	196					
Mean time to second move	NA					
Avg. Lifespan	6.73					
Avg. Personalism for Spell	0.26					

Table 6 breaks down the data for each dictator based on their first and second moves to personalize the security forces. We saw that leaders who purge first have a short lifespan, but those who purge second, *after* making appointments on loyalty, do enjoy longer spells. In fact, when purges are the second non-simultaneous move, the average expected lifespan of a dictator in office jumps to 16 years irrespective of the first move they made. A total of 29 dictators purged second and did so 5.9 years after the first move. An example of this strategy was Deng Xiaoping in China, who maintained an overall level of personalism throughout his tenure. He moved to make appointments on merit from year 1 (1978), but only purged in year 11 (1989) around the Tiananmen Square protests, weeding out reformist elements within the Chinese Communist Party. Kim Il Sung's spell in North Korea is another example of this personalization path. He first made appointments based on loyalty shortly after taking over in 1948, and followed this up two years later with a large-scale purge of party members deemed not to have fought US and South Korean occupation strongly enough. Most notably, when purges are the second non-simultaneous move after both loyalty appointments and personal control of the security apparatus, dictators are expected to last a whopping 22.6 years in office, on average. This is relevant since the existing literature focusing on purges (Sudduth, 2017) may have given the impression that such move was the first (even only) and most urgent and crucial to consolidate power. However, we find that purges have actually been more effective as the second non-sequential move for dictators after a few years in office.

Another path worth noting is the one consisting of first making appointments based on loyalty and, second, moving to personally control the security apparatus. A total of 11 dictators followed this path, 9 of which led party regimes and 2 personalist regimes according to Geddes' typology. The fact that most of these regimes were party-based explains the relatively long lifespan of 17.5 years as well as the average levels of personalism (0.37). A notable example of this personalization path is Mao Zedong in China, who made appointments on loyalty rapidly after taking over power in 1949 and moved to personally control the military in 1964, when he switched China's defensive military strategy to one of guerrilla warfare (Fravel, 2019). Another example was Sierra Leone under Joseph Saidu Momoh, who placed loyalists within the military when he took over in 1985 and personalized control over the security apparatus in 1987 after uncovering a coup plot against him.

Contrast this with leaders who do not make a second non-simultaneous personalizing move (i.e., second move is 'none'). Average lifespans are all close to or below the mean, and some of them below or at the median. Generally, dictators who do not make a second move only last 6.73 years in office and exhibit low overall levels of personalism. The most common pathway when no second move is forthcoming is to make appointments on loyalty, but these regimes only last 5.73 years on average with a personalism level of 0.16. Two simultaneous first moves of loyalty appointments and personal control of the security apparatus yields the longest longevity at almost 10 years. Purges, again, have some of the lowest levels of life expectancy at 3.5 when they are the only move and 6.06 when they are combined with appointing loyalists to top military positions.

A couple of final notes on the data. First, note that the figures and tables only include leaders that have made at least one personalizing move during their tenure. Indeed, out of the 466 total number of dictators in the sample, 231 made no attempts at party personalism, and 113 dictators made zero moves to personalize the military. Combined, a total of 93 dictators did not

make any personalization moves throughout their entire tenure. Of these, the longest lasting was Leonid Brezhnev at 18 years, followed by Burkina Faso's Sangoulé Lamizana at 14. The rest of the 91 dictators lasted on average only 2.7 years in office. The absence of power grabs is thus generally associated with much shorter tenures.[5]

Second, some dictators made no party personalization moves and instead focused on personalizing the military. Notorious among these is the case of Lee Kuan Yew, who ruled Singapore for 25 years since independence in 1965 until his retirement in 1990. He only made appointments based on loyalty within the military, and maintained the lowest overall level of personalism in the sample (0) throughout his tenure. The next longest lasting case was Mozambique under Joaquim Chissano at 19 years, and he also only made loyalty appointments within the military. The rest of the dictators who made only one personalizing move during their tenure (73) lasted on average only 4.27 years.

An interesting set of cases are dictators who fully personalized the military (made all possible moves) without making any civil personalism moves. There are 3 of these leaders in the sample. Particularly astonishing is the case of Moussa Dadis Camara in Guinea, who ruled for only one year, 2009.[6] In this short period of time he purged officers, made military appointments based on loyalty, created a paramilitary group and took personal control of the security forces. The speed of the moves might have generated backlash and contributed to his swift downfall. The other cases are Raul Castro in Cuba, who inherited a stable regime from his brother in 2006 and went on to stay in power until his retirement in 2018; and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, who ruled for 14 years and only carried out purges in his eleventh year in office. These cases point to the importance of the regime the leader inherits. In cases of family succession, dictators will most likely be able to personalize power sooner, making strong moves without incurring coordinated and dangerous backlash from other powerful members within the regime. In cases where leaders come into power in a weak regime, or they take over and create a new regime from scratch, personalization will generally be slower and focus on moves that do not provoke swift backlash, such as loyalty appointments, and avoiding those that do, such as purges.

5. CONCLUSION

This chapter offers a detailed examination of the process of personalization of power in dictatorships. Although scholars have started to analyze personalism using new composite measures, we still know little about the sequence of decisions and actions dictators adopt to personalize their rule.

Our descriptive analysis points to a few interesting patterns in the data. First, it is extremely rare for dictators to solely conduct purges as their first personalization move once they take office. Rather, both in terms of civil as well as military personalization, dictators first make moves aimed at gaining personal control of appointments to high office. The goal is to quickly be able to influence the composition of the ruling coalition and install loyalists in positions of power, both in government and in the military, and only then conduct purges. In fact, first taking personal control of military appointments within about 1.5 years in office and then purging after another 5 years is

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[5] Whether making no moves leads to shorter tenures, however, requires further research.
[6] He took over mid-December 2008 and was overthrown mid-January 2010.

one the most common personalization pathways found in the data. Second, it is also rather rare for leaders not to attempt any sort of personalization move during their tenure. Only 18.6% of dictators did this, and this is likely due to the fact that simply did not have much time to personalize. After accounting for Leonid Brezhnev's and Sangoulé Lamizana's abnormally long tenures without a single personalizing move, this group of dictators lasted only 2.7 years in office, on average. That said, a large majority of first moves came within 2 years of tenure for the full sample, which makes us think that the dictators who did not personalize at all were perhaps too weak to attempt to do so. More research is needed to answer this question. Third, a relatively large set of leaders, including some of the longest lasting ones, took personal control of the security apparatus first. These tended to be dictators who came in via an election and ruled through a strong party apparatus, which probably conferred them the strength to take a stronger approach *vis-à-vis* the military. There are many other patterns worth mentioning. Among them is the fact that many autocrats only make one power grab, be it civil, military, or one of each. However, these dictators tended to last fewer years in power than those who made more personalizing moves over time. The circumstances for why this is so and whether personalism actually promotes dictator longevity should be explored in further research.

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