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Paper Title: Advantages of Autocratic Sponsorship: The Durability of Superpower Client Regimes

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Dissertation Title: The Durability of Client Regimes: Foreign Sponsorship and Autocracies, 1945-2010

Summary:

Conventional wisdom suggests that great power patrons ‘prop up’ client dictatorships. However, this is generally assumed to be the case rather than systematically analyzed. In this dissertation, I offer the first comprehensive analysis of the relationship between foreign sponsorship and authoritarian regime survival with the use of an original dataset of all autocratic client regimes in the postwar period. This analysis reveals counterintuitive results. In fact, patronage from Western powers – the United States, France, and the United Kingdom – is not associated with client regime survival. Instead, only Soviet sponsorship reduces the risk of autocratic regime collapse. I explain this variation by considering both patron strategies and the unintended consequences of foreign sponsorship for the domestic distribution of power in client regimes. Western ambivalence toward the rule of their particular autocratic allies – and a primary focus on fostering military forces capable of resisting armed challengers – meant that client dictators were much less threatened by forces from outside the regime. However, they had much to fear from their own militaries. Ensured of their survival if challenged from below, Western-backed clients engaged in state-weakening coup proofing strategies even in the face of sustained, existentially threatening insurgencies. In turn, as Western patrons would accept a successful coup as a fait accompli, coercive agents had a strong incentive to seize power. This dynamic of coups and coup proofing severely weakened client
dictatorships and left them more vulnerable to threats from below. This constituted an intertemporal tradeoff for Western-backed dictators. In exchange for reducing the immediate threat of a coup d’état, they risked the medium- to long-term consequences of weakening coercive capacity and the risk of patron abandonment. Paradoxically then, Western support enabled state-weakening behavior which necessitated further patron intervention when challenged. In contrast, no Soviet-backed regime ever lost power to a coup. Soviet support for entrenching the rule of its particular authoritarian allies through the creation or expansion of vanguard parties, political commissars, and secret police forces rendered coups much less threatening to Soviet clients. It was this invulnerability to elite threats that resulted in longer tenures for Soviet sponsored client regimes.

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