



Legitimization through patronage? Strategies for political control beyond ethno-regional claims in Darjeeling, India



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ABSTRACT

This paper asks how contending political leaders legitimize their authority in a competitive authoritarian regime. It contends that 'legitimization through patronage' is an important means of convincing the public of the rightfulness of a leader's authority when 'ideology-based normative legitimacy' is declining and the formal electoral route is not available. Drawing on an understanding of legitimacy that accounts for leaders' strategies and public receptions, the paper seeks to explore the moral norms and values on the basis of which followers evaluate leaders' performance. Drawing on anthropological studies of patronage in South Asia not only helps to transcend an exclusively instrumental understanding of patronage by stressing its moral dimension but also complements comparative politics' focus on the national level by studying the everyday processes through which political leaders' legitimacy is locally constructed and contested in patronage relations. Evidence from Darjeeling in northern West Bengal/India (where the State's preferential treatment of a regional party claiming leadership of a movement for regional autonomy has contributed to the establishment of a dominant party regime) highlights patronage's potential as a legitimating strategy – but it also reveals its practical limits. While the establishment of resource monopolies over developmental funding helped leaders of the ruling party to "feed" their support networks and foster reputations as selfless "social workers", differing bases for the evaluation of leaders, the growing expectations of followers, and dependence on external patronage resources limited the long-term success of patronage as a legitimating strategy. This, in turn, enabled the State to curtail demands for autonomy by controlling regional elite construction.

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Introduction

How do contending political leaders legitimize their political authority outside of the formal electoral route? Based on the insight that political authority, broadly defined as the unconstrained and unquestionable acceptance of hierarchy (Straßenberger, 2013, p. 493) or the claim to obedience from the ruled (Weber, 1972, p. 542), cannot solely be based on an effective administration or on repression (Beetham, 2001, p. 109; Burnell, 2006; Gerschewski et al., 2012; Weber, 1972), the study of political legitimacy seeks to determine the conditions under which individuals voluntarily obey the commands of a ruler (Barker, 1990) and accept their positions in unequal systems of power (Cohen and Toland, 1988, p. 4). Legitimacy is a form of belief and a distinctive feature that the ruled ascribe to those in power that does not result from coercion or material interest (Beetham, 2001; Karateke and Reinkowski, 2005; Weber, 1972). This belief can be based on a variety of sources,

including ideology, traditional or religious convictions, or a leader's charisma (Weber, 1972). In democratic regimes, governments attain formal legitimacy through free and fair elections.

This paper is concerned with the question of how competing political leaders attempt to legitimize their authority when the aforementioned bases of legitimacy are unavailable, disturbed, or declining. Even under national democratic regimes, the electoral route is not always everywhere available. For instance, as I will demonstrate in my case study on north-eastern India, the State's¹ preferential treatment of political parties that claim leadership of an ethno-regional movement for autonomy can foster the establishment of dominant party regimes (cf. Lacina, 2014, 2009). These parties have the capacity to distort democratic processes which gives rise to competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way, 2002) in which opposition parties' opportunities to gain power are minimized.

¹ I use the upper case "State" to refer to the federal units (e.g. the State of West Bengal), and the lower case "state" for the larger polity.

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Yet, drawing on ethno-regional sentiments alone is insufficient to sustain leaders' political legitimacy in the longer term. I argue that such programmatic appeals must be supported by factual measures. Patronage, as I will demonstrate, is an important mechanism through which political leaders attempt to legitimize their political authority. Patronage refers to a personalized, reciprocal exchange relationship in which patrons possessing higher status and power provide protection or services to clients in return for the latter's loyalty, time, or service (Piliavsky, 2014a, p. 5).

While studies in comparative politics primarily focus on the instrumental value of patronage relations between rulers and elites (Blaydes, 2006; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Greene, 2010) and draw on national-level data and models (Lust, 2009 is an exemption), this paper emphasizes the localized, everyday processes through which political leaders' legitimacy is constructed and contested by their potential followers. Drawing on an understanding of legitimacy that equally considers leaders' strategies and public receptions (Karateke, 2005), I seek to explore the moral norms and values on the basis of which potential followers evaluate the performance of leaders. This qualitative approach allows me to transcend an exclusively instrumental understanding of patronage and helps to emphasize its socially contested moral dimensions. I propose that a more differentiated understanding of patronage as an instrumental *and* moral relationship makes it possible to understand under what conditions patronage is prone to sustain or diminish political leaders' legitimacy in the longer term.

Darjeeling, a district in the northern part of West Bengal/India, provides an apt context to research the outlined questions. Since the 1980s, the ascendance of ethno-regional demands for a separate State of "Gorkhaland" has fostered the establishment of a State-supported dominant party. Its authority was institutionalized through special arrangements for regional autonomy through a District Council established in 1988, which gave rise to a competitive authoritarian regime. Although elections to the Council were held regularly until 1999, a change in dominant party and revived agitation for Gorkhaland between 2007 and 2011 has resulted in the absence of elected institutions at both the district and local levels. This forced the new ruling party to legitimize its regional authority by other than the formal electoral means.

I contend that the absence of elected developmental institutions at the local and district levels between 2007 and 2012 allowed the leaders of the ruling party to easily capture and distribute governmental development funds, to not only "feed" their networks of local party workers but also to foster their reputation as selfless social workers while sidelining political rivals. However, difficulties in satisfying followers' high expectations and dependence on external patronage resources limited the success of patronage as a long-term strategy. Rather, leaders' dependence on State-sponsored development funds gave the West Bengal government an effective tool to control this regionally ruling party.

To support my argument, I first review studies from comparative politics on legitimacy and the role of patronage in competitive authoritative regimes (Section 'Legitimacy in competitive authoritarian regimes'). Based on a critique, I then draw on studies that further explore the role of patronage in South Asia (Section 'Patronage as a moral relationship'). Transcending instrumental understandings of patronage, the insights from these studies provide a framework to understand leaders' authority in relation to their performance, their potential followers' expectations and the followers' morally grounded evaluations of their leaders (Manor, 2000; Price, 2007, 1999; Vaishnav, 2012). In Section 'Competitive authoritarianism in Darjeeling', I briefly describe the political regime in Darjeeling before turning (in Section 'Producing legitimacy in Darjeeling') to a discussion of the consequences of patronage for legitimizing leaders' authority. The paper ends with my primary conclusions in Section 'Conclusion'.

Legitimacy in competitive authoritarian regimes

In contrast to approaches that evaluate the bases of political legitimacy with respect to abstract qualities, such as the existence of democratic freedoms, free elections, judicial independence (Beetham, 2001; Dogan, 2009; Peter, 2009) or the accordance of governance with the constitution (Rawls, 2001), the situation in Darjeeling demands an interest in the construction of legitimacy under conditions in which the formal electoral route is not available. To approach this, I first introduce a framework that places equal emphasis on the two-sided construction of legitimacy in ruler-ruled relations. Based on this, I then review studies from comparative politics on the construction of legitimacy in competitive authoritarian regimes.

Following the approach of the historian Karateke (2005), who studied the construction of legitimacy in the Ottoman Empire, I understand legitimacy as deriving from the degree of coherence between governmental conduct/output and public expectations. Karateke distinguishes between a "supply side" of legitimacy, referring to how an authority or ruler shapes the subjects' expectations and fulfills them, and the "demand side", or the subjects' expectations of the authority. Both the demand and supply sides are embedded in moral norms and values on the basis of which the ruled evaluate the legitimacy of an authority (ibid.). Accordingly, the ways in which systems of power are organized embody the ideas and values based on which the legitimacy of such systems rests (Barker, 1990; Beetham, 2001; Weber, 1972).

Karateke further distinguishes between normative legitimacy derived from an exterior source or legal claims (such as divine legacy, heredity, or nationalist claims), and factual legitimacy.² While the former concerns general and longer-term attitudes of the ruled toward the system (Easton, 1965 cited in: Gerschewski et al., 2012), the latter refers to short-term public demands and emphasizes a government's compulsion to demonstrate its *de facto* success through the provision of services, such as public goods (Croissant and Wurster, 2013), socio-economic attainments (Gerschewski et al., 2012), or the "fulfillment of societal needs and desires such as material welfare and personal security" (Burnell, 2006, p. 549). Thus, factual legitimacy (also "output-legitimacy" (Schmidt, 2012) or "performance legitimacy" (Burnell, 2006)) is based on the public's factual recognition of a ruler's output (Schmidt, 2012, p. 83). The success of regimes' attempts to create factual legitimacy depends on the continuous supply of resources, rendering regimes vulnerable if supplies are exhausted (Levitsky and Way, 2002; Rubongoya, 2007; Schmidt, 2012). If normative legitimacy is weak, a ruler must support it through such factual measures (Karateke, 2005).

Based on these premises, an analysis of the demand side of legitimacy entails questions of what individuals regard as rightful sources of authority and as proper ends and standards of government (Beetham, 2001; Cohen and Toland, 1988; Stillman, 1974). Such beliefs and moral norms are always contested in society. In her study on the legitimacy of "big men" in Ghana, Lentz (1998) observed a variety of differing moral values and norms based on which leaders' performance is evaluated. The existence of such different "moral communities" (Lentz, 1998, p. 62) emphasizes that the parameters of legitimacy are not fixed but "debated, agreed upon or rejected within processes of social competition and/or conflict" (Alfonso et al., 2004, p. xii). Legitimacy thus understood is not a static attribute of power but a constructed and contested notion (Alfonso et al., 2004, p. xi; Lentz, 1998).

I now turn to studies in comparative politics that research how rulers in competitive authoritarian regimes strive for legitimacy, and I focus on the discussion of patronage. As in democratic

² David Easton (1965) called these "diffuse" and "specific system support".

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