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The ruler's game of musical chairs: Shuffling during the reign of Ethiopia's last emperor

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ABSTRACT

Dictators frequently shuffle their officials to break up potentially threatening cliques within their regimes. Yet, how they go about rearranging their officials is not well understood. Using network analysis and focusing on the last emperor of Ethiopia, this paper offers a systematic analysis of shuffling by tracing the movements of subordinates over the course of thirty four years. The results show that while officials where frequently shuffled, their movements were confined within clusters of different branches. Such circumscribed movements, I argue, represent the mechanism by which dictators reconcile the tradeoff between suppressing potential rivals and encouraging expertise for the proper functioning of the state apparatus.

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"The only reason the ministers do not assassinate their sovereign is that their... cliques are not strong enough"

Han Fei Tzu, Basic Writings

"I need a new team. They must be compatible to me. If they are not... I'll pop them out of their chair in a minute"

Chicago police superintendent, Joseph DiLeonardi, after shuffling his top officials.¹

1. Introduction

The greatest threat to the dictator's power comes not from the population at large, but from his subordinates in the regime. Powerful officials can marginalize the dictator's influence over the state apparatus or even worse, stage a coup d'état to oust him completely (Svolik, 2012). It is this looming threat that dictators have faced since ancient times and one way they have done so is by resorting to the equally old practice of shuffling – the frequent rotation of officials from one position to another. The purpose of this strategy is to prevent subordinates from growing too close to each other, to disperse them around the government before they have a chance to coalesce into cliques² and form alternative centers of power with

which to challenge the ruler. Journalist Blain Harden captures this dynamic eloquently when describing Mobutu's thirty-two years as Zaire's ruler:

Conventional wisdom in Kinshasa [capital city] says that besides Mobutu and his family only 80 people in the country count. At any one time, 20 of them are ministers, 20 are exiles, 20 are in jail and 20 are ambassadors. Every three months, the music stops and Mobutu forces everyone to change chairs.³

Though a potent political instrument, there is a cost associated with shuffling (Carter, 2013). For an organization to function, let alone flourish, those who staff it must possess at least some competence. The latter, in turn, is a function of time. The longer officials are allowed to remain in a position, the more expertise they are likely to develop. Yet, the logic of shuffling demands that precisely the opposite be done. Instead of extending an official's time horizon, it should be shortened such that officials are in constant flux. And in this context, the opportunity to acquire expertise is rare. Hence, to employ the strategy of shuffling is to pit the two central concerns of the dictator against each other – namely personal safety and a functioning bureaucracy. How, then, do dictators balance this tradeoff?

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¹ "Top Police Shake Up in Chicago." Toledo Blade, August 16, 1979.

² Throughout this text, I use the term clique in its broader sense to mean group, coalition or faction.

³ "Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko: Political Craftsman Worth Billions," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 1987. This passage was brought to my attention by Milan Svolik who originally quoted it in his book (2012, 79).

Existing literature suggests that dictators are likely to opt for personal safety at the expense of fostering expertise (Quinlivan, 1999; Haber, 2006; Bueno De Mesquita and Smith, 2011; Egorov and Sonin, 2011), but these claims are largely based on anecdotal evidence. This is not surprising considering that most of the internal power struggles in dictatorships remain hidden from the public and unfold outside the media's purview. In the rare instances when internal conflicts do spill out into the news headlines, they are often violent public spectacles like North Korea's Kim Jong-un ordering the execution of the previously powerful official, Jang Sung-taek⁴ or Saddam Hussein purging sixty senior members of the ruling Baath Party.⁵ Shuffling, in contrast, is subtle although no less potent. The act of reassigning officials is unlikely to garner the same attention as the violent episodic events that often follow purges. Yet, even paranoid stricken Stalin who was notorious for his purges when first rising to power soon recognized that it was unsustainable (Gorlizki and Khlevniuk, 2004). It simply puts too much strain on the dictator's recruitment pipeline to fill the void created by constant purging. While shuffling has received more attention in democratic settings (Kam and Indridason, 2005; Huber and Martinez-Gallardo, 2008; Indridason and Kam, 2008; Iyer and Mani, 2012) the prevailing bias towards violent episodic events coupled with the inaccessibility of data on the internal politics of dictatorships (Art 2012, 365) has presented a serious obstacle to both theoretical and empirical progress on this topic in authoritarian settings. Consequently, our understanding of this vital political instrument so ubiquitous among dictators remains poorly understood.

The analytic strategy of this present study is to focus explicitly on the movements of officials; to trace where in the regime subordinates are reassigned to and map out the pattern that emerges. Shuffling, in other words, is conceptualized as constituting a flow in network. Just as infectious diseases move between people, so too do officials move between government branches, which gives rise to a network with measurable structural properties. And it is those structural properties that shed light on the underlying organizing principle of shuffling.

I implement this strategy in the context of Haile Selassie's reign, the last emperor of Ethiopia, where I use an original dataset of appointments that span from 1941 to 1974. The case of Haile Selassie is especially relevant for the question at hand for three reasons. Being an absolute ruler, his appointment powers were vast and his use of this prerogative to shuffle and weaken potential rival has been noted by historian as forming a central piece of his ruling strategy (Clapham, 1969; Kapuscinski, 1989). Second, the internal resistance Haile Selassie faced when undertaking the arduous process of transforming a loosely connected empire to a centralized state apparatus made him particularly sensitive to the tradeoff between personal safety and a functioning bureaucracy. Lastly, Haile Selassie's long tenure provides many instances of shuffling, which allow us to better unearth the deeper strategic considerations at play. Indeed, the results show that while officials where frequently shuffled, their movements were not arbitrary. Rather than move across the whole of the government, officials were shuffled within clusters of different branches. Such locally circumscribed movement, I argue, represents the mechanism by which dictators reconcile the tradeoff between suppressing potential rivals on the one hand and encouraging expertise for the proper functioning of the state apparatus on the other.

This article makes several contributions to our understanding of dictatorships. First, in its approach, this article adds to the small

but growing body of literature that shows the utility of social network analysis to the study of authoritarian regimes (Easter, 2000; Razo, 2008; Schoenman, 2014; Keller, 2016). Second, while exiting research has emerged on cabinet appointments in authoritarian regimes (Arriola, 2009, Francois, Rainer et al. 2015), this paper goes further and shows that there are important appointment patterns occurring below the cabinet level. More specifically, the findings presented herein suggest that officials are subject to the dictator's strategic action well before becoming part of the cabinet. Fourth, I depart from existing studies in an important way. Carter (2013) – focusing on the Republic of Congo – and Francois, Rainer and Trebbi (2014) along with Bethke (2012) who cover ministerial allocations in several African countries, approach the subject of shuffling as one of survival. They proceed by distinguishing between more and less sensitive positions in government and then identify the characteristics of those who enjoy long tenure spells in these different tiers. While this approach captures the officials who are removed as a result of shuffling, it leaves out a central component. Shuffling is about reordering the position of officials and as such, the question of *where* they go is just as important as the question of *whether* they go. And it is the former that I wish to investigate in the present study.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. I first offer a more in depth overview of the tradeoff between shuffling and competency. I then contextualize the case of Haile Selassie and the nature of the data that I use in this study. Third, I present evidence showing the extent to which officials were shuffled by focusing on the duration that officials held a given position as well as the time they spent together as co-workers. Fourth, I use network analysis and present evidence that movement was locally circumscribed.

1.1. Alternative powerbase as a threat to the ruler

The term dictator derives from the Romans and was originally meant to denote a temporary measure wherein the senate transferred its powers to a single ruler during times of crisis (Gandhi, 2008, chap.1). Accordingly, what distinguishes dictators from democratically elected rulers is their vast decision making powers. From formulating laws to the prerogative of appointing officials, dictators operate with virtually no formal mechanisms to check their powers. Dictators, however, do not enjoy unbridled power as their limits are found in the informal arenas. Over two millennia ago, the Chinese political philosopher, Han Fei Tzu, identified the chief threat to the ruler as coming from his ministers. Their secret ambitions for more power and use of subterfuge to attain it led, he wrote, "superior and inferior [to] fight a hundred battles a day" (1964, 40). These are battles fought not in the fields between opposing armies, but battles fought inside of the government between rulers and their supposed allies. Although they are formally subordinate to the dictator, political officials are by no means passive as they actively seek to expand their own powerbase by means of increasing their informal following among fellow members of the regime (Tulloch, 1987). And it is for the ruler to ensure that these informal cliques do not grow to become a threat to his power.

Cliques are certainly not exclusive to dictatorships, but their value is particularly important in this political context. The reason, as Svobik notes, is the "absence of an independent authority that would enforce agreements among key political players. . . [where] promises made at one point by the dictator, his allies, or the regime's repressive agents may be broken later, when they become inconvenient" (2012, 14). Whereas the formal division of powers found in democratic settings effectively defines and upholds the authority of the different offices in government, to the extent that they exist in dictatorships, such demarcations rest on a weak foundation which can change in the immediate future. Cliques are thus

⁴ See: Williamson, Lucy, "North Korea Confirms Removal of Powerbroker Jang Song-thaek. BBC. December 9, 2013.

⁵ See: "Saddam's 1979 Baath Party Purge." BBC. December 13, 2013.

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