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WHEN DICTATORS FALL

PREVENTING VIOLENT
CONFLICT DURING
TRANSITIONS FROM
AUTHORITARIAN RULE

by Adam Day, Dirk Druet
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Executive Summary

Entrenched authoritarian systems are those where a leader or group has centralized power and resources in a manner that limits meaningful political and economic inclusion, instrumentalizes key State institutions, reduces democratic space and often allows a specific individual to remain in power well beyond typical constitutional limits. This paper concerns the transitions out of entrenched authoritarian rule, the often volatile moments when new leadership comes into power. Some transitions take place peacefully, largely within constitutional order, but others may descend into civil unrest or even escalate into all-out civil war. In support the UN's prevention mandate, this project is driven by the question, *why does one country peacefully transition out of authoritarian rule while another falls into violent conflict, and what can the UN do to influence pathways away from violence?*

This project draws on scholarship around authoritarianism and neo-patrimonial States as well as original research by United Nations University Centre for Policy Research into entrenched political systems. It identifies four key factors that may influence whether a transition tends to result in violent conflict: (1) past forms of rule (democratic or authoritarian); (2) the way in which a political system transitions (e.g. through a coup, election, death, transfer of power or popular uprising); (3) the fate of the individual leader, including questions of personal property and accountability for human rights abuses; and (4) economic performance and the degree of inequality within a given society. It further finds that, while all regime types have experienced both violent and peaceful transitions, those that are highly personalized (vesting power in an individual rather than institutions) tend to experience greater difficulties in moving into inclusive forms of governance, which may influence longer-term prospects for peace.

Why does one country peacefully transition out of authoritarian rule while another falls into violent conflict, and what can the UN do to influence pathways away from violence?

In exploring a comprehensive set of cases over the past 30 years, this project also makes some broader (and often counter-intuitive) findings about the role of violence in such transitions. The transitions that occurred with the lowest levels of violence were in systems with some of the poorest governance indicators. In fact, countries at various points on the governance scale witnessed transitions that brought about dramatic and sustained change in the distribution of power with little or no violence, a finding which suggests that the quality of governance may not be directly linked to violence levels in transitions. In contrast, two factors did appear to correlate with relatively high levels of violence: those involving foreign intervention, and transitions triggered by public uprisings. The significant rise in frequency of popular uprisings as the dominant form of transition in recent decades has meant that transitional moments have become more prone to large-scale violence. These findings raise significant questions about the role of external actors in transitional processes, and how the international community might engage before, during and after changes in leadership.

These trends in transitions present a complex and interrelated set of challenges for the UN, which often must balance its prevention mandate alongside respect for sovereignty and host State consent. The UN is often poorly placed



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to ramp up its prevention activities in entrenched authoritarian systems, in part because national leadership tends to be strongly resistant to engagement on politically sensitive subjects. Additionally, these systems tend to have weak and/or highly politicized institutions, raising dilemmas for UN efforts to build institutional capacity as a hedge against violent conflict. UN leverage over the political leadership in-country is frequently constrained, given that authoritarian leaders tend to be isolated and less susceptible to traditional forms of pressure (e.g. sanctions or moral pressure). That said, there is strong evidence from this project's case studies that the UN has engaged in creative and impactful practices in transitional settings, helping to reduce the risks of violence and building bridges towards longer-term outcomes.

Based on these findings, the paper offers twelve conclusions and recommendations for the UN when confronted with transitional moments from entrenched authoritarian rule:

1 Bad governance does not mean bad transition.

There is no necessary relationship between poor governance in an entrenched regime and violence during a transition out of that political

system. Instead, levels of violence appear more directly tied to the trigger for transition, the broader socioeconomic conditions in-country, and the forms of international engagement. Focusing too much on bad governance may mean missing out on the more relevant factors driving violence, whereas adding a political economy lens is far more likely to anticipate emerging risks. This does not mean governance is unimportant — in fact, it may be determinative in longer-term sustainability — but for immediate violence reduction it may be less important than current approaches presuppose.

2 Change is slow, relapse is likely.

Entrenched authoritarian systems have had decades to establish themselves and develop strong resilience against change. The likelihood of post-transition governments repeating the patterns of their predecessors is high and should be closely monitored beyond the initial transition. Policymakers should be cautious in proposing quick fixes in the aftermath of transitions and should be humble in their attempts to impose new models too quickly. The present UN policy framework may create unrealistic expectations by focusing almost entirely on a quick shift to elections and constitutional rule.

3 Early presence can mean early analysis and action.

In many of the cases identified, the UN's longstanding presence in-country and/or in the region was seen as crucial in building anticipatory relationships and effective networks well ahead of transitions. The capacity to understand political dynamics during the pre-transition phase is critical to effective UN engagement; however, these resources are often prioritized elsewhere. UN programming such as electoral assistance, governance or civil society capacity-building projects should include a political analysis function.

4 Balancing violence/instability and democratic rights.

Transitional moments place the UN in the uncomfortable position of choosing between immediate risks of instability versus implicitly accepting further repression of democratic rights. Often the most expedient path to limiting violence may appear to be to support an authoritarian government, possibly decreasing the longer-term prospects of a more inclusive governance system and enabling the denial of human rights more generally. Politically astute leadership is required to strike the right balance, as is policy guidance that facilitates frank discussions of the short- and medium-term risks.

5 Institutions matter.

Effective, legitimate and transparent State institutions appear to offer the most viable pathway from authoritarianism to a more inclusive system. But institutions and ostensibly democratic processes are also an important modality for autocratic leaders to maintain their grip on power. The UN's traditional models of institutional support are highly susceptible to this diversion of resources and may well have been co-opted to bolster authoritarian regimes in a wide range of settings. At the same time, support that is highly targeted at a viable political process can assist in reducing risks during a transition. UN support to institutions and processes in these cases should be planned with

this risk in mind and with a clear understanding of the objective of the support.

6 Leverage is often indirect.

Entrenched authoritarian systems are often resilient to external influence, especially traditional Western engagement that is typically seen as advancing a neoliberal agenda. Multilateral approaches involving tools like sanctions, large-scale convenings, and attempts to pressure new governments have a poor track record. Instead, leverage in advance of and during transitional moments must often be achieved indirectly, via regional or other players who have a more influential role in-country. Strategic alignment at the regional and international levels significantly improves the likelihood of success.

7 Understand the elite bargain.

The UN must understand the structure, membership and incentives of the elite patronage network in entrenched authoritarian systems, given that power is often distributed outside of formal institutional channels. The capacity to analyse political, economic and even psychological factors is important in this regard, and UN Country Teams (UNCTs) in the pre-transition phase should be able to generate such analysis. The ability of the UN to appeal personally to senior political actors, either directly or by marshalling influential figures, can be part of an effective strategy starting well before the transition.

8 Engage individual power brokers.

Personalities — of the leader and of members of his or her patronage network — matter. The ability to build relationships with and tailor engagement strategies around the unique personalities of individual power brokers may prove critical to a UN strategy. The UN should prioritize and build staff capacities in political engagement and mediation skills at all levels, and UNCTs in pre-transition countries with

entrenched political systems should ensure that this skillset is present in their team.

9 Assess unity of international will and scope for influence.

Understanding the external factors that could potentially pull a country towards deeper entrenchment should form part of the UN's analysis and strategy making. The ways in which countries within regions influence and support each other can play an important role in determining a transition process and in shoring up autocratic regimes. In this context, the notions of "linkage" and "diffusion" should be well understood within the UN. Likewise, building a strong understanding of the composition of international groupings of political engagement in support of prevention activities is critical.

10 Maintain clear roles and responsibilities.

Division of roles across different UN actors can mitigate political resistance and maximize the collective impact of the UN pre-transition countries with entrenched political systems. Often, maintaining a low profile while pursuing longer-term engagement strategies in-country can be paired with more robust external engagement and messaging. UNCTs should make maximum use of non-resident UN actors, including by sharing information and coordinating strategy.

11 Look for risks and opportunities around elections.

Elections are often high-risk moments for the stability of authoritarian systems. Elections and their aftermath may offer an opportunity to encourage the broadening of political dialogue and the evolution or renegotiation of the elite bargain, including as part of UN prevention engagements during this period. It also offers an opportunity for the UN to broaden its network, especially when it is seen as an honest broker.

12 Scale up support during the short window of opportunity after a transition but also hold the government accountable post-transition.

When supporting a country through the unpredictable period of a leadership transition, the UN should not leave planning for its relationship with a successor political system until the post-transition period. When the UN is asked to support the long-term recovery and development of a country following a transition from entrenched rule, it often faces a unique set of capacity challenges which, if not addressed during a relatively short window of opportunity, could imperil the new government's ability to maintain popular support, implement elements of the transitional political settlement, and manage political spoilers. The UN should assume that the new government will face pressures and incentives to backslide on its commitments, often needing to focus on its own precarious position to the detriment of other issues. Here, the UN should put in place measures to monitor and hold the government to account for its obligations to its citizens, including through the strategic leveraging of international assistance. The period during a transition may be the best time to begin such discussions, when the UN often enjoys its strongest leverage.

Introduction

This research paper seeks to identify how the UN can overcome the challenge of engaging preventively when an entrenched authoritarian leadership transitions out of power. This paper defines “entrenched authoritarian system” as one with a leader or ruling party that has centralized power and resources in a manner that limits political and economic inclusion, reduces democratic space and often allows a specific individual to remain in power well beyond typical constitutional limits. When entrenched leaders lose power — whether through an election, incapacity/death, a coup or a popular uprising — the transition process presents significant risks to the stability of the country. Almost by definition, entrenched systems are not well prepared for transitions; years of centralization of power and resources and highly politicized institutions often mean the State is ill-equipped to manage the uncertainty following a change in power and the increased risk and unpredictability such periods bring.

Transitions do not follow a uniform path. Some remain peaceful and occur within the constitutional order or return quickly to constitutional rule. Others may devolve into significant civil unrest, with uncertainty over the leadership of the country that requires regional or international engagement. At the worst end of the spectrum, the departure of an entrenched leader can drive a country into an all-out civil war, causing instability in the broader region. Why does one country successfully transition into democratic rule and a positive developmental trajectory while another falls into violent conflict? What factors influence the pathways of such transitions, and how can external actors help support peaceful sustainable outcomes? These questions are of crucial importance for the peace and security work of the UN.

This paper explores the above questions with a view to helping the UN adopt effective preventive approaches in a range of transitional contexts around the world. It is based on existing UN policy and practice in response to unconstitutional changes in government and significant disruptions in non-mission settings, the prevention of electoral violence, sustaining peace and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030.¹ As such, the paper has been designed to support the UN’s broad prevention agenda and also specific country-level approaches where entrenched systems may be soon facing a transition, offering a framework for decision-making by UN actors and their partners without making value judgments about the nature of any particular political system.

The paper proceeds in four parts. **Part One** defines entrenched authoritarian systems, situates them within the broader literature on authoritarianism and neo-patrimonial States and describes important trends over the past 30 years. It further examines the characteristics of different forms of rule, and how the type of political system may influence the potential instability of a transition moment. **Part Two** draws on an original UNU-CPR compilation of a comprehensive set of cases over the past 30 years (see Annex) and analyses a range of transitions, identifying the key factors that influence the durability of a particular political system, how it reacts to shocks, and the likelihood of escalation into violence during transitional moments. **Part Three** describes the challenges and opportunities facing the UN before, during the after transitional moments. **Part Four** paper concludes with a set of good practices and recommendations for improved analysis, planning and engagement in entrenched authoritarian settings.

Understanding Entrenchment

This section situates the notion of “entrenchment” within the broader literature on authoritarianism and neo-patrimonial States. Building on that literature and our review of a range of transitions over the past three decades, this paper then lay out a typology of political systems: personalized, military, single-party, multi-party and mixed. While not determinative, the type of political system is a factor in the likely trajectory of a transition and offers a helpful starting point for the analysis.

Definitions

This paper defines “entrenched authoritarian system” as a leader or party/group that has centralized power and resources in a manner that limits meaningful political and economic inclusion, instrumentalizes key State institutions, reduces democratic space and often allows a specific individual to remain in power well beyond typical constitutional limits.²

Definitions in the literature on authoritarianism focus almost exclusively on the absence of political rights in elections, whereas the definition used here also includes reference to economic exclusion, the instrumentalization of key State institutions and the tendency to adjust constitutional terms. This definition thus allows for greater political-economy analysis, focusing on the ways in which leaders centralize both political power and resources. It also draw directly from the literature on neopatrimonialism, which describes political systems in which rulers

co-opt national institutions for personal rule.³ These additional characteristics are important because the goal of this research is to identify the likely causes of violence and instability during a transitional moment, which often relate to socioeconomic issues as much as political ones.

A second important definition is that of a “political system.” Here again, it is helpful to draw from the political science literature on the subject, where the term “regime” is used almost interchangeably with “political system.” A regime has been defined as “basic informal and formal rules that determine what interests are represented in the leadership group and whether these interests can constrain the [leader].”⁴ This definition recognizes that political systems make decisions and exert power in different ways, through formal institutions but also via *de facto* rules that constrain the actions of others. It also helpfully delinks a political system from an individual — if a particular leadership of an individual ends but the core interests and rules governing how power is distributed remain intact, the political system continues.⁵ In this paper, the term “regime” is used when quoting directly from literature that uses the term but this paper relies on “political system” as a less charged term.

Finally, it is important to have a clear definition of the term “transition.” Simply put, this paper defines “transition” as the end of the term in power, most commonly through the departure of the leader. This can be triggered by a competitive election to determine the executive where someone other than the incumbent or one of



their inner circle is permitted to take office.⁶ A transition can also occur when a government is ousted by a coup, popular uprising, rebellion, civil war, invasion or voluntarily stepping aside. Or a transition can involve the ruling group markedly changing the underlying rules for selecting leaders and policies such that either a new group takes control or a fair election is permitted. An example of this latter form of transition might be the death of a leader, after which their constitutional successor opens the country for national elections.⁷

A Typology of Entrenchment

The type of system in place may play an important role in the levels of violence during a transition and, thus, should be clearly identified. Bartusevičius and Skaaning have proposed that political systems be classified in terms of their relationship to the electoral process, suggesting five types ranging from non-electoral to “polyarchies.”⁸ Diamond, following well-known sources like Polity and others, has categorized political systems on the basis of levels of repression and political space.⁹ Hadenius and Teorell created a typology based on how leaders retain power.¹⁰ Wintrobe has suggested that the personal approach adopted by the leader should be the defining characteristic of a given system.¹¹

While these types are useful, modern authoritarian regimes tend to be hybrid in nature, often allowing for regular elections and adopting many of the outward characteristics of democracy.¹² Recognizing this, Levitsky and Way coined the term “competitive authoritarianism” to describe the majority of today’s entrenched political systems, which tend to use democratic institutions and processes to shore up their power and secure long-term incumbency.¹³ Indeed, examining the qualitative issues around credibility, legitimacy and inclusivity of institutions is as important as the type of system.

Based on original research and a comparison across the literature, the categories provided by leading expert Geddes were found to be the most helpful for this project.¹⁴ Geddes separates political systems into four categories: military, personalized, single-party and mixed.¹⁵

- A **military regime** is one in which a group of officers determines who will lead the country and has a direct influence on the national policies of the State.¹⁶
- A **personalist regime** is defined as one where power is concentrated in the hands of an individual.¹⁷ Scholars have developed indicators to measure the degree to which a regime can be considered personalist, including direct



UN Photo/Martine Perret

control over the security services, control of party executive positions and personal control of appointments.¹⁸ For the purposes of this study, personal concentrations of wealth and control of national resources were added as an important factor in defining personalism. The extent to which a ruling system can be considered personalist is a crucial indicator for both the resilience of the political system, and the consequences for the country when a transition takes place (discussed in the following section).

- A **single-party** regime occurs where a hegemonic party controls power and resources without the availability of meaningful contestation for other political parties or groups.¹⁹ The party is able to control the career paths of its leadership, dominates the national institutions and is also largely able to control the outcome of electoral processes.²⁰ This paper's definition of single-party system would include countries that had multiple parties but where all but one of them were not able to meaningfully participate in the electoral process or day to day rule.²¹ This would also include the large number of African and Latin American cases where a liberation movement

takes power via decolonization without dismantling authoritarian colonial State, merely replacing colonial leaders with another set of elites who mostly replicate practices they inherited upon taking power.

- Maintaining a category of **mixed regime** reflects the fluid nature of entrenched political systems, where countries may have multiple parties, a party that has dominated for years through apparently competitive elections, and/or a single leader who is gradually drawing power and resources to themselves. What Levitsky and Way call "hybrid regimes" demonstrates the growing importance of political systems' maintaining the appearance of democratic institutions, notably because of the recognition that institutions are, in fact, one of the most expedient ways for authoritarian leaders to maintain power over the longer term.²²

What are the key factors that influence the type of political system that develops over time, and how do the characteristics of different systems affect their durability? What roles can external actors play in shaping the development of entrenched political systems, before, during and after a transition? These questions guide the inquiry of the remainder of this paper.

The Pathways Into and Out of Entrenched Authoritarian Systems

This part analyses the pathways into and out of deeply entrenched political systems. It aims to identify what factors influence the levels of violence and instability during and after transitions, including related to the type of political system. It offers three principal outcomes: (1) “stable” transitions have low levels of violence and a relatively quick reversion to a lasting political arrangement;²³ (2) “uncertain” transitions have some persistent violence that cannot be contained by the domestic political process and may revert to some levels of political entrenchment as the system seeks to stabilize itself; and (3) “unstable” transitions constitute a shock to the system, leading to widespread violence, uncertainty about the capacity of the State to regain control and high risks of political turmoil in the medium term. In both uncertain and unstable transitions, significant external engagement — including by the UN — is often required.

The pathway into entrenched authoritarian systems

The largest proportion (over 40 per cent) of entrenched authoritarian systems since the end of World War II started by ousting an earlier authoritarian regime.²⁴ This suggests that an

important factor in whether a country is susceptible to authoritarianism is the prior existence of authoritarian regimes, which create limits on the credibility of existing institutions. Bolstering this point is the fact that more than one quarter of the authoritarian systems analysed since World War II began with the ouster of foreign rule and transitions from colonial rule.²⁵ This could suggest a degree of path dependency in post-colonial settings in particular, where the post-colonial leaders continue authoritarianism of the colonial system.

A second crucial factor affecting entrenchment is **the way in which a political elite comes into power.** Modern authoritarian systems tend to begin in six main ways: (1) military coups that replace a government with either a military regime or a new government; (2) military insurgencies, often to replace foreign powers; (3) popular uprisings that persuade or force leaders to hand power over; (4) foreign conquest; (5) the specific case of ruling parties resulting from liberation movements in a post-colonial context; or (6) “authoritarianization” in which a competitively elected elite gradually changes the rules to limit political participation and assert dominance over institutions.²⁶

Though historically coups have been by far the most common path into an authoritarian

regime, they have become less central in the past twenty years, due in large part to the end of military-led regimes in Latin America. Popular uprisings have become more prevalent starting points for authoritarian rule. Increasingly common is the process of “authoritarianization” whereby a leader (military or civilian) gradually usurps the reins of power over time, building a ruling party around themselves and excluding or marginalizing the opposition. Authoritarianization is the most difficult to identify, as many of the ways in which leaders entrench themselves are not easily measured and may, in fact, be belied by the presence of a democratic façade marked by the absence of credible institutions.

There is general consensus that **low levels of economic development** play a role in the trajectory of a country towards political entrenchment.²⁷ The link between economic development and democracy has been established for decades and remains a strong indicator of tendencies towards authoritarianism.²⁸ Heavy reliance on natural resources — oil especially — may influence the risks that a political system will become entrenched over time, though the scholarship has not reached consensus on this.²⁹ The link between a narrowly based political economy and entrenchment is evident in Angola, where the petrochemical economy was critical in providing the resources needed for José Eduardo dos Santos to consolidate his control of the one-party system underpinning his rule.

Finally, one of the most determinative factors in the creation of entrenched authoritarian systems is **time**. A range of studies have shown that an individual's length of stay in office dramatically increases the likelihood of entrenchment, as a leader is able to control the political and economic levers of power, instrumentalize the security apparatus against enemies and gradually become less susceptible to external efforts to influence internal distributions of power.³⁰ As the following section will explore, tenure in office is but one of many ways in which entrenched leaders acquire, consolidate and maintain power.

How entrenched authoritarians stay in power

Some entrenched political systems appear very stable, enduring for long periods of time. From a peace and security perspective, how entrenched systems stay in power is important, as it offers clues as to how and when a transition might take place. Moreover, the ways in which leaders maintain power often indicate the extent of violence that may take place during a transitional moment.

In general terms, military-led regimes tend to last the shortest period of time (less than 10 years), personalist regimes longer (15 years) and party-led regimes the longest (nearly 24 years).³¹ This may coincide with the higher likelihood of military regimes to hand over power to civilian-led parties, or to what Geddes terms the “inherent sources of fragility” within military systems of governance.³² It may also indicate that a broader dispensation of political power may make such political systems more stable, though this has not been shown definitively. Just as important is the finding across a range of scholarship that **entrenched authoritarian systems are not necessarily less stable than open democracies**, and may, in fact, have some advantages when it comes to longevity.³³ Exploring the resilience of such systems — including the endogenous and exogenous factors that influence their staying power — is the purpose of this section.

A. ENDOGENOUS FACTORS

Endogenous factors are those related directly to the political system itself, or how it relates to the population within the country. Of these, an especially important characteristic that influences longevity is the **internal coherence of the elite group**. As a landmark study noted, “there is no [leadership] transition whose beginning is not the consequence — direct or indirect — of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself, principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hard-liners and soft-liners.”³⁴ The ability of a political system to maintain coherence, avoid factionalism and

present the outward appearance of a unified group all contribute to a more resilient regime. This coherence is especially important in moments of economic crisis: if a political system is able to contract around the core elite and avoid fracture, while maintaining a high degree of loyalty, it has a strong chance of survival.³⁵

As noted above, **time in office** is an important factor in the ability of political systems to entrench. In fact, Bueno de Mesquina and Bak have noted that as the tenure of a leader grows, the political system stabilizes, reducing the political costs associated with repression. This manifests as an inverted U-curve of risk for the regime: high risk of overthrow near the beginning of a regime (where the power networks are not yet fully settled), then a long period of extremely low risk as the leader secures a hold on the political and economic levers of power, and finally a rapid increase as the leader may overstep in use of repression and/or fail to provide sufficiently inclusive economic growth, triggering mass uprisings and/or a coup.³⁶

The **extent to which a political leader is able to distribute largesse to key populations** is a key factor in its longevity. As Geddes writes, “extensive patronage networks help regime elites to continue distributing to those most essential for their survival while shifting the burden of the [economic] crisis to other, politically weaker parts of the population.”³⁷ This suggests that even in a moment of economic crisis, a political system that is able to maintain its most important channels of influence will tend to stay in power. Conversely, where such patronage dries up, it can contribute to a rapid decline into violence.³⁸ Corruption levels do not have a necessary relationship with the longevity of political systems; in fact, highly personalized regimes in particular exhibit extraordinarily high corruption levels while still maintaining a stable grip on power.³⁹ As such, corruption may be a contributing factor in popular uprisings in particular but is not in itself a necessary source of instability.

Related to sharing wealth is power-sharing, where effective mechanisms for distributing power not only reduce the likelihood of a coup but also mitigate against fracturing within the

ruling coalition.⁴⁰ Power distribution is especially important in entrenched political systems because of their lack of inherent legitimacy: without meaningful elections and typically composed of a small elite group, leaders must find ways to keep large constituencies sufficiently loyal. But scholarship on this issue finds that power-sharing does not necessarily need to be particularly broad. Bueno de Mesquina has coined the term “**selectorate**” to define the small group of elites who secure the selection of a leader and an even smaller subset called the “winning coalition,” who are the individuals necessary to keep the ruler in power.⁴¹ Power-sharing amongst the winning coalition is often enough to secure a leader for decades, as amply characterized by Robert Mugabe’s rule in Zimbabwe.

The most important factor in the longevity of entrenched authoritarian systems is (ironically) the presence of ostensibly democratic institutions in-country. A wide range of academic scholarship has decisively concluded that **entrenched systems tend to draw stability from the very institutions designed to ensure democracy, freedom of expression and political inclusion**.⁴² Specifically, institutions such as parties, legislatures, electoral commissions, constitutional courts and advisory councils tend to be instrumentalized as vehicles for distributing power to the elites.⁴³ There is strong evidence that periodic — often unfair or corrupt — elections stabilize autocracies in the longer term.⁴⁴ At the same time, courts, police and security ministries become part of the coercive apparatus that — acting in the name of rule of law and democracy — is often used to quash opposition.⁴⁵ This institutionalization of authoritarian rule renders political systems less susceptible to economic downturns than leadership structures that have not institutionalized.⁴⁶ Most importantly, institutions can have a legitimizing effect on entrenched rule, bringing about enhanced order, stability, and effectiveness, even while continuing to arrogate power to the leader and their immediate inner circle.⁴⁷

The use of institutions highlights the broader importance of **the legitimacy of entrenched authoritarian governments**, and the various

techniques leadership groups employ to maintain legitimacy even while concentrating power and resources. Kailitz has pointed to the direct links between legitimation and durability of political systems, while Dukalskis and Gerschewski have identified four mechanisms by which regimes legitimize their rule, through the: (1) indoctrination of the population; (2) creation of a passive populace that does not engage in the democratic process; (3) performance of a variety of legitimate roles; and (4) creation of quasi-democratic procedures.⁴⁸ Of these, institutionalized forms of legitimation, in particular via electoral and legislative institutions, have the most direct impact on the longevity of a political system.⁴⁹ Strong economic performance also tends to contribute to increased legitimation, particularly if there are mechanisms by which the State is able to disperse largesse to the population.⁵⁰

B. EXOGENOUS FACTORS

The **survival of a leader** is one of the most important factors in regime survival, though clearly most important in highly personalized systems.⁵¹ Where an individual has arrogated significant power, the death of the leader coincides with the collapse of the political system nearly half of the time.⁵² However, there is often a strong incentive amongst a leader's elite group to maintain the individual in power even well beyond the typical age of Head of State competence, given the uncertainty that accompanies the end of an individual's rule. The reigns of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria or Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe are testaments to the strong need for entrenched systems to keep the individual in power.

The **perceptions of the population** matter a great deal and are increasingly the tipping point for the survival or fall of an entrenched leader. Perceptions are difficult to assess, as Geddes notes: "in stable dictatorships most people seem to support the regime but after the dictatorship falls, almost everyone seems to have wanted regime change."⁵³ The extent to which the leader is able to communicate a message of coherence within the elite group is often crucial in maintaining key perceptions

about the strength of the political system.⁵⁴ In some settings, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the Arab Spring, rapid changes in popular perceptions about the government catalysed large-scale movements that brought transitions far more quickly than anticipated.

Economic performance is a crucial factor in the ability of a leader to maintain control. Bartusevičius and Skaaning have in fact suggested that "State capacity, backed with a strong economy" are the crucial determinants of political system stability.⁵⁵ Strong economic performance is a force multiplier for the other factors, allowing patronage networks to remain flush with cash, lucrative institutional positions to be offered to potential opposition and quick pay-outs offered to restive communities. This is especially important in highly personalized systems which have not institutionalized, as they are more susceptible to economic shocks.⁵⁶ In contrast, historically the best indicator of a coup is poverty, and nearly every major uprising in the past ten years has been presaged poor economic performance.⁵⁷

This leads to a finding that **strong economic performance can have the effect of increasing authoritarianism** in some settings. Referring to "development authoritarianism," Matfess has suggested that the relatively strong economic trajectories of countries like Ethiopia under the previous administration allowed the leadership to simultaneously deliver public works and services while exerting increasing control over the levers of power in country.⁵⁸ Just as important is the way in which political systems respond to economic downturns: regimes that are able to use "soft repression" (restrictions on political space) rather than resort to "hard repression" (infringements on physical integrity) tend to perform better and avoid a loss of power.⁵⁹

The **role of the international community** in determining the longevity of entrenched political system is a well-examined factor. This may manifest itself as a "linkage," a cross-border tie between countries that can involve political, economic or military exchange.⁶⁰ While much of the literature on linkage has focused on the efforts of Western donors to influence political system away from autocratic

Tunisia's revolution fuelled by economic exclusion

In December 2010, the self-immolation of a young street vendor over socioeconomic grievances in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid sparked nationwide protests that quickly engulfed the Arab world. The revolution that started over a confiscated fruit cart ended the 24-year rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali within four weeks.

While Tunisia's macroeconomic performance was positive during Ben Ali's rule, it was perceived that some population

groups were not benefitting from this economic situation and coastal regions profited to the detriment of regions in the interior and the south. Economic reforms were used primarily to redistribute privileges to the families of the President and his wife, to protect their vested interests and to reinforce the regime's control over the private sector. Ben Ali's family was unusually



personalist and predatory in its corruption. More than half of Tunisia's commercial elites were personally related to Ben Ali.

After deposing its autocratic leader, Tunisia underwent a rapid transformation to democracy. However, eight years into democracy, frustrations about the lack of economic progress and continued economic exclusion threaten Tunisian democracy as support for a return to authoritarian rule rises.

tendencies, entrenched political systems often instrumentalise foreign aid to further entrench their positions. Moreover, there is strong evidence that entrenched political systems use linkages to help similar political systems persist, for instance through preferential trade deals⁶¹ or direct economic support to like-minded governments.⁶²

Beyond the support of one entrenched political system for another, there is evidence to suggest that even the democracy promotion efforts of Western countries may be having the unintended effect of a *de facto* linkage in support of authoritarian regimes.⁶³ This is not to deny that Western countries have often supported authoritarian governments in the name of stability or where it advanced their foreign policy goals. Here, **efforts to support good governance, electoral processes and various national level reforms, often do not play out as intended in neopatrimonial settings and sometimes are co-opted by entrenched political systems, resulting in further consolidation of power.**⁶⁴ Some scholarship has argued that the UN's State-building support to the nascent Government in South Sudan in 2011 offers an example of external interventions' role in shoring up entrenched regimes.⁶⁵ Tansey

and von Billerbeck also make a convincing claim that international peacebuilding efforts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo helped entrench the country's leadership under Joseph Kabila.⁶⁶ As the final section will suggest, the UN's engagement in transitional moments should take this risk more squarely into account.

A related aspect of foreign influence is the concept of "diffusion," describing a process by which ideas, practices and structures spread from one political system to another.⁶⁷ Again, most commonly thought of through the lens of democracy promotion, diffusion concerns how authoritarian political systems influence and support each other in largely unintentional ways. The repressive practices of one political system may offer a learning model for another faced with a similar scenario in its home country. The diffusion effect can be especially pronounced when a region has several entrenched political systems in close proximity to each other, eloquently described by Kneuer and Demmelhuber as a phenomenon where "countries tend to change their regimes to match the average degree of democracy or non-democracy found among their contiguous neighbours."⁶⁸ The effects of diffusion can also be accentuated by major power prestige or

participation in regional organizations.⁶⁹ And in moments of crisis — where authoritarian rules are at real risk — other leaders in the region may come to their aid to prevent a similar outcome in their own country.⁷⁰

As Part III will explore, international actors must account for the full range of exogenous and endogenous factors if they are to develop effective engagement strategies in the face of entrenched political systems. A key point to be taken from the above analysis is that a transition cannot be analysed in isolation but should rather be considered within the broader context of exogenous (regional and international) factors.

C. PATHWAYS OUT OF ENTRENCHED REGIMES: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

There are many paths out of an entrenched authoritarian system. It can transition peacefully to democracy or to another authoritarian system; it can experience a period of instability and then either move toward democratic rule or revert to some form of entrenchment; or it can descend into deeper instability and larger-scale violence. There is no path dependency upon one issue but this research suggests that the following factors are crucial determinants in the paths of most transitions: (1) whether the country has had past experience with democratic rule; (2) the regime type in place at the moment of transition; (3) whether an entrenched administration ends through a coup, uprising, voluntary departure or natural causes; (4) the specific fate of the leader, including whether there are assurances about their legal and financial future; (5) the specific impact of human rights prosecutions; (6) the levels of economic inequality at the time of the transition; (7) economic performance and the extent of reliance on natural resource exploitation; and (8) the personality traits of the individual leader.

There is some evidence that a country's **past experience with democratic rule** may have a positive impact in terms of limiting violence through transitions.⁷¹ In several post-colonial settings, countries have oscillated between democratic systems and more authoritarian

rule, including in Ghana and Nigeria, which has allowed for periods of growth of democratic institutions. If these are then employed to provide civil liberties, and, even more importantly, socioeconomic benefits to the population through the transition, it may indicate a tendency for more peaceful outcomes.⁷² The findings here are not conclusive but point to the likely links between legitimate institutions and violence mitigation in transitions periods.

The **regime type does not appear to directly influence violence levels during a transition period**: all types have experienced both peaceful and violent transitions. However, regime type does appear to affect the prospects for transition into inclusive political systems, which may have a longer-term impact on stability. These findings highlight a crucial finding: **personalist regimes are extremely difficult to transition directly into inclusive institutional rule, and their demise often prompts a reversion to authoritarianism**. In part due to the lack of regularized succession procedures and the concentration of power within a patronage-based loyalty system, personalist systems tend to end with a high degree of uncertainty and potential instability.⁷³ While other regime types may also have high concentrations of power, personalist regimes display the greatest tendency towards instability on this front.

How a regime ends is an important factor in determining violence levels and instability through a transition, particularly the difference between coups and popular uprisings. During the Cold War, the majority of transitions from entrenched systems were through coup but this changed as the number of military dictatorships declined in the post-Cold War period.⁷⁴ Over the past 30 years, a nearly uniform Western policy to refuse aid to governments that assumed power via a coup, along with an African Union policy against supporting governments that achieved power through unconstitutional means, have contributed to a significant reduction in the number of military coups worldwide. The decline in coups has been accompanied by a growth in popular uprisings as the dominant form of transition. Over the past decade, coups have accounted for less than 10 per cent of ends to entrenched systems, while more than

one quarter have ended due to some form of popular uprising.⁷⁵ This may be due to leaders adapting new strategies to “coup proof” their hold on power,⁷⁶ or the increasing effectiveness of popular uprisings (including in the age of the social media).

Importantly, there is evidence that the **shift towards popular uprisings has made transitions less stable and more prone to violence**, including as authoritarian systems increasingly use violence to repress public uprisings.⁷⁷ This is because the actions required to put down a popular uprising are far greater than a coup: security services often employ violence to prevent large-scale gatherings in public spaces, quash political rallies and gather information from political leaders, while peaceful protests can quickly spread and escalate into violence. It is also because popular uprisings pose the most direct risk to entrenched leaders: 85 per cent of successful uprisings result in the installation of a new leader.⁷⁸ Additionally, unlike coups, popular uprisings display a high likelihood of “contagion” that spreads instability beyond national boundaries.⁷⁹ Regardless of the longer-term outcomes, the trend towards popular uprisings therefore has serious implications for peace and security: transitions appear to be getting more dangerous to the stability of countries and regions.

This raises a related factor, the **fate of the individual leader** stepping down from power. Since the end of World War II, roughly half of entrenched leaders have been jailed, killed or exiled as a consequence of loss of power.⁸⁰ Where leaders and their close entourage are not offered sufficient assurances of their personal safety, their protection from criminal prosecution, and/or the security of their assets, they tend to cling to power and appear more willing to use violence. Here, coup attempts often lead to violence where leaders appear at risk of arrest and/or prosecution (such as the 1999 coup against João Bernardo Vieira in Guinea Bissau, or the 1991 coup against Moussa Traoré in Mali). Where leaders are provided with a safe pathway out of power, the risks of violence appear much lower. Robert Mugabe’s loss of power in the bloodless 2017 coup, after which he enjoyed full diplomatic status, a large house and pension and control of his sprawling business interests,

provides an example. Similarly, in 2011, Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh was offered immunity from prosecution as a key condition for his stepping down during the popular uprising.⁸¹

Concerning the fate of the leader, **prosecutions** for crimes committed while in office may have a positive impact on lowering the levels of repression in an entrenched regime, but there is clear evidence that they also may reduce the likelihood of stable political alternation.⁸² The prospect of prosecution may deter leaders from relinquishing power, especially if there is a risk that they will face trial and imprisonment following removal from power. Alberto Fujimori’s potential liability for human rights violations in Peru offers one example where potential criminal liability may have caused a leader to entrench further, as did Omar al-Bashir’s response to his indictment by the International Criminal Court in 2008.⁸³ In this context, one of the most important factors is **whether the leader has post-exit guarantees**; where highly personalized political systems have not allowed for the development of credible national institutions, there is a higher likelihood that the threat of external prosecutions (such as the ICC) or national accountability will have the effect of “bunkerizing” leaders and reducing the chances of transition.⁸⁴ Even human rights trials in neighbouring countries with similar regimes may have a similar, if slightly lesser, impact of reducing the likelihood of a stable transition.⁸⁵

The level of **economic inequality** does appear to influence the stability of transitions but scholarship has not agreed on the impact *per se*. This is because inequality cuts two ways: In highly unequal societies, marginalized peoples have high incentives to revolt against the ruling regime, yet wider income disparities mean the ruling elite have more to fear from losing power and may be more willing to use repression to protect their status.⁸⁶ Proponents of the so-called “distributive conflict” explanation for transitions have suggested that inequality triggers social upheaval, causing the downfall of entrenched regimes.⁸⁷ There is evidence to support this theory, as slightly more than half of the transitions from authoritarian rule are correlated with high degrees of inequality in country, and 30 per cent took place in countries in the top tercile of inequality.⁸⁸ This does not explain the nearly

Weak State institutions: Yemen falling apart

When the Arab spring unfolded in early 2011, Yemen was palpably on the brink of civil war. The fragile power balance among the country's elite became increasingly unstable and long-term President Ali Abdullah Saleh unable to handle the multi-faceted humanitarian and economic crisis facing the country. The popular uprising exposed the lack of legitimacy of the country's historically weak formal institutions, leading to a loss of faith in the nation State framework and the fragmentation of State power.

Over his three-decade rule, Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime worked to centralize the distribution of power and wealth. Rather than building up the formal institutions of the State, Saleh

co-opted local leaders and powerful rivals into a patronage network based on oil rents and access to licit and illicit business opportunities, gradually divorcing these figures from increasingly marginalized local constituencies.

The country's substantial oil revenue, accounting for approximately 80 per cent of the country's income in 2011, enabled Saleh's Government to feed a network of allies and subdue potential adversaries for years. At its zenith, the informal political settlement of the Yemeni elite was held together by a power-sharing

deal between three men: Saleh, who controlled the 'State'; General Ali Mohsin, who controlled the largest share of the army; and Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, a tribal leader, head of the Islah party and broker for Saudi Arabian patronage payments to Yemeni tribes. After stabilizing the country for 20 years, this power balance began to break apart during the third decade of Saleh's rule. As the country's oil revenue diminished, Saleh's patronage network became inherently unsustainable. After decades of governance built on elite collaboration rather than strong institutions, Saleh's departure from power escalated long-standing regional, social and economic grievances.



half of transitions that take place with relatively low levels of inequality, or some of the scholarly findings that increases in inequality may in fact work against transitions in some settings.⁸⁹ One finding, however, is constant across the literature: **when democracies do emerge with high levels of inequality, they are far more likely to revert to authoritarian rule.**⁹⁰ From a conflict prevention standpoint, this is relevant as it points to the high likelihood that the underlying economic grievances that led to the transition will continue, increasing the risks of further social upheaval. The lack of inclusive political structures too may have longer-term risks of instability.⁹¹

It is important to distinguish economic inequality from performance. **Poor economic performance** is perhaps the most clear-cut trigger for a transition (not only from entrenched systems but also in open democracies). This is consistent with well-known demonstrations

that poor economic performance is a direct cause of political instability.⁹² Here, the Arab Spring offers several examples, including the popular protests that toppled Ben Ali in Tunisia amidst an economic crisis, and the large-scale unrest in 2011 following an oil shortage crisis in Yemen.⁹³ The coup that ousted Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe in 2017 also took place amidst a longstanding economic crisis, as did the 2019 coup against Omar al-Bashir Bashir in Sudan. Across the major studies of transitions from entrenched regimes, one of the most common factors is the strong relationship between poor economic performance and a higher likelihood of instability.⁹⁴

Related to economic performance is the finding that entrenched regimes that depend more heavily on the **exploitation of energy and natural resources** for their principal income are less likely to transition directly to a more

inclusive dispensation of power.⁹⁵ Here, our case studies certainly found a high correlation between deep entrenchment and reliance on natural resources — including in Angola, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and others — but no necessary impact of natural resources on the transition. Nonetheless, there is evidence that poor wealth-sharing of natural resources tends to erode trust amongst parties in post-conflict settings,⁹⁶ and that effective wealth-sharing can have a strongly beneficial impact on such transitions.⁹⁷ However, this analysis did not find evidence to indicate that natural resources affected the likelihood of violence during or after transitions. Therefore, this may be a secondary factor for consideration.

Several scholars have pointed to the **personality of the individual leader** as a factor in the sustainability of regimes and also to the course of a transition when they leave power.⁹⁸ There is some evidence that highly personalized regimes are more likely to initiate violence when pressured out of office, meaning the individual traits of the leaders are of paramount importance when assessing the risks of violence.⁹⁹ This may be because in highly personalized systems the risks are concentrated in a single individual, creating a zero-sum game that easily escalates into violence. Other research has suggested that older leaders are more likely to initiate violent responses against their populations,¹⁰⁰ though the analysis for this paper was unable to identify specific character traits that might influence the stability of transitions processes.

Finally, there is strong evidence that **external factors interact with internal dynamics** in important and influential ways in transitions processes. As Magen and Morlino aptly suggested, rather than viewing international engagements as purely exogenous factors, it is more useful to analyse how they shape domestic outcomes.¹⁰¹ As mentioned above, the literature on linkage and leverage suggests that external actors can influence transitional outcomes via a range of approaches including diplomatic pressure, political and economic conditionalities/deals/support, threat or use of force or other forms of engagement. Some of these will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

D. PATHWAYS BACK: THE REVERSION SYNDROME

As the earlier analysis has highlighted, the gravitational pull of authoritarianism is strong, particularly in entrenched personalist political systems. The concept of “authoritarian backslides” considers the very high likelihood that the end of one entrenched political system will transition into another, or that the short-term changes in the political system immediately following a transition will not last.¹⁰² This is particularly the case when nascent opposition parties are unable to build strong coalitions or institutionalized presences in a country, allowing entrenched parties to quickly resume the tactics of concentrating power.¹⁰³ Here, the presence of institutions of governance — even ones dominated by an entrenched regime — decreases the likelihood that a transition will result in a new dictatorship.¹⁰⁴ Again, the presence of viable institutions appears an important hedge against entrenchment, though often also the means by which leaders hold on to power.

This is important from a peace and security perspective because of the increasing role of popular uprisings in transitions. As described above, uprisings are overwhelmingly a response to socioeconomic conditions created by poor governance, often related to high levels of corruption and a sense that the State is being instrumentalized by a few for the elite. When a transition takes place and results in a similarly entrenched political system, there is a higher likelihood that popular resentment will persist, or even increase in the short-term, raising the risks of violent confrontation.¹⁰⁵

E. VIOLENCE LEVELS IN POST-COLD WAR TRANSITIONS

An examination of transitions in entrenched political systems during the post-Cold War period reveals the diversity in the pathways taken by the transitions in these systems. By the definition used here,¹⁰⁶ 48 transitions from entrenched rule have taken place during this period (see Annex I for a list of cases and their key attributes).

Almost one third of transitions began following the death-in-office of the national leader, including countries with hereditary succession arrangements such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; 1999, 2011), Jordan (1999) and Saudi Arabia (2005). Deaths also occurred in States whose leaders had remained in power since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, namely Turkmenistan (2006) and Uzbekistan (2011) and sub-Saharan African States with first- and second-generation post-colonial leaders, the longest-serving of which were in Gabon (2009, at 42 years in power), Togo (2005, at 38 years in power) and Côte d'Ivoire (1993, at 33 years in power). Nine leaders resigned, mostly following widespread public protests against their rule, for example in the Dominican Republic (1996), Egypt (2011) and Yemen (2012), while an additional eight, including in Mozambique (2005) and Myanmar (2011), retired from public office under less intense pressure. In seven cases, the leader was ousted by a coup (including Mali in 1991, Guinea-Bissau in 1999 and Zimbabwe in 2017) or assassination (Rwanda in 1994). In only five cases did the leader leave power after losing democratic elections, including in Senegal (2000), Malawi (2003) and the Maldives (2008). In five cases, the leader was removed as a result — at least in part — of foreign military interventions, namely in the DRC (1997), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011) and The Gambia (2017).

The pathways taken by these transitions also differ widely. **The 24 smoothest transitions — those that moved to the resulting system of governance with minimal or no violence and limited public protest — took place in systems with the worst governance scores**, including countries with hereditary succession traditions (DPRK in 1994 and 2011 and Saudi Arabia in 2005). This was true even when the transition was brought about by irregular means, as was the case in Qatar in 1995 when Emir Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani was deposed by his son in a bloodless coup after 23 years in power. Transitions in non-hereditary regimes also proceeded fairly smoothly, regardless of the cause and political outcome of the transition,

for example following the deaths-in-office of the leaders of Turkmenistan (2006) and Uzbekistan (2016); the democratic elections in Malawi (2003); and the resignation of the Cuban leader (2008). Peaceful transitions also occurred in political systems with better Polity scores, including the elections that ended the rule of Abdou Diouf of Senegal (2000) and the elections following the retirement of Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia (2004) and Joaquim Alberto Chissano of Mozambique (2005).

At the other end of the spectrum, **transitions that spiralled into civil war included all those that were brought about or aided by foreign interventions or rebel incursions** (Rwanda in 1994, DRC in 1997, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011) as well as the coup in Mali in 1991. The next most-violent transitions — those involving significant loss of life and/or State repression — occurred when the transitions were brought about by public demonstrations in countries with moderate to high autocracy scores on the Polity index, namely Indonesia (1998, score of -7), Kyrgyzstan (2005, score of -3), Guinea (2008, score of -1), Tunisia (2011, score of -4) and Egypt (2011, score of -3). This may indicate a limited causal relationship between levels of autocracy and the violence involved in a transition, though it confirmed the findings above that popular uprisings tend to be the most destabilising transitions.

Taken together, these findings indicate that **there is no certain pathway through a transition process but that particular risks appear to be involved in settings with large-scale public demonstrations and/or foreign intervention**. Interestingly, there appears to be no correlation between the extent of repression and/or corruption (indicated by low Polity scores) and any resulting levels of violence; in fact, the most violent transitions were not from systems with the worst levels of governance. Finally, there is some correlation between those transitions involving foreign intervention and relatively high levels of violence (though it is not clear whether one causes the other).

Challenges, Risk and Opportunities for UN Engagement Before, During and After Leadership Transitions

The UN's approach to transitions in entrenched authoritarian systems has evolved over the years, including through development of a robust set of prevention-related policies and practices to address volatile transitions moments. Nevertheless, in practice it faces recurrent challenges in addressing risks that emerge before, during and after transitions. This section summarizes the principal challenges and opportunities for engagement based on a study of a wide range of cases.

A. IN THE LEAD-UP TO A LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

In the period before a transition, the UN often has a relatively small presence in-country, led by a Resident Coordinator and guided by a mandate largely focused on development and/or humanitarian support. While there are sometimes openings for more political engagement and certainly opportunities to promote risk-reduction measures like power-sharing and broader economic inclusion, the UN's analytical capacities are often prioritized

elsewhere and the UN Country Teams (UNCT) is poorly positioned to respond in a preventive manner to the emerging risks. Several common challenges arise across a wide range of the cases considered, as follows.

The political taboo: In many entrenched authoritarian systems, discussion of sensitive political topics — whether by the UN, members of the political opposition or civil society — is considered an affront to the authority of the leader and thus unacceptable. Resident Coordinators who attempt to raise matters of governance and human rights may find themselves facing strong resistance by their host governments and restrictions on their ability to work. Moreover, UN development programming that seeks to promote good governance and inclusive political participation — such as projects to strengthen rule of law and access to justice, promote a more capable and depoliticized public service, build the capacity of civil society, or support to women's political participation — may not receive the consent of the State. Citizens who interact with the UN and other international actors on these issues may be at



UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

risk of persecution.¹⁰⁷ Lacking viable entry points with the key political actors, it is often difficult for UN leaders in these settings to develop in-depth and timely analysis of the situation as a sufficient level of granularity to enable nuanced scenario development and contingency planning.

Despite these challenges, UN actors have, in many cases, succeeded in implementing strategies in the lead-up to transitions that enable them to maximize their political engagement while carefully navigating the sensitivities of the host government. One important strategy in this regard is a **political division of labour**, in which resident UN officials focus on maintaining a strong relationship with government actors, leaving the delivery of strong messages on sensitive topics to senior officials based outside the country. For example, critical messages on human rights, persecution of marginalized groups and freedom of speech can be issued through the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), allowing the Resident Coordinator a degree of distance from the issue while maintaining pressure on the government.¹⁰⁸

Institutional support and capacity-building: In countries with closed political systems, targeted capacity-building and technical support is often cited as offering the best possible strategy for

gaining regular access to officials and promoting good governance practices, while staying on the right side of government. However, as the above literature demonstrates, institutional capacity-building can play both enabling and mitigating roles in political entrenchment, while providing important opportunities for building anticipatory relationships prior to transition. This highlights the importance of properly situating capacity-building activities in a broader political strategy and tailoring them to the country's political dynamics, looking to mitigate the risk that support may be co-opted or misused.

Effective, non-partisan institutions can play a role in facilitating smooth leadership transitions and promoting positive outcomes from transitions in entrenched authoritarian systems, particularly in terms of the **management of elite interests**. Legislative institutions, argue Boix and Svoloik, "alleviate commitment and monitoring problems caused by the secrecy that pervades authoritarian governance."¹⁰⁹ They make an authoritarian leader's promises — to potential rivals and/or would-be democrats — more credible. Credible institutions are also necessary to underpin the social contract between government and population, including through effective public service delivery and promoting development across the national territory, which significantly reduces the risk of violence in a

transition context. Wright and Escribà-Folch find that the institutionalization of the elite bargain in a democratic institution can help sow the seeds for a successful transition following the collapse of a political system. Relative to other types of authoritarian regimes, they argue, elites from systems with political party structures are more likely to participate in and win competitive post-authoritarian elections, creating a place for themselves within a new political order and reducing their incentives to resist change.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, international support to legislatures, political parties, the judiciary and security forces can play an enabling role that helps autocracies pursue repressive policies more effectively. In competitive autocratic regimes, technical capacity-building in electoral management aimed at increasing the credibility of national elections can lend undue legitimacy to often flawed elections. National legislatures often form critical parts of the survival strategies of authoritarian leaders because they offer a way of incorporating potential threats to the regime into the governing structure of the regime itself through co-optation. Here, **the warnings for the UN are clear: well-intentioned peacebuilding can have unintended consequences.**

Institutional capacity-building can also have the unintended effect of strengthening authoritarian entrenchment when it interacts with other international assistance aimed at preserving or strengthening entrenched regimes. As noted by Yakouchyk, powerful States may support autocratic regimes to pursue their national economic interests, expand their regional influence or prevent a “contagion” effect of democratization.¹¹¹ Such support can take the shape of material assistance such as the sale of arms and surveillance equipment; political protection in international institutions like the Security Council; or economic cooperation to blunt the effects of sanctions imposed by other States or organizations. Without unity of political will at the international level, institutional capacity-building efforts may have the effect of promoting “effective government rather than democratic governance.”¹¹² In other words, technical capacity-building in the absence of larger political conditions may have the effect of reedifying the existing logic of the State and will thus not help to mitigate the risks to stability

that motivated the intervention in the first place. Examples in this regard include US support for Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in the years leading up to the Arab Spring; France’s assistance to Paul Biya in Cameroon to shield him from domestic and international pressures for democratization in the 1990s; and Saudi Arabia’s military intervention in Bahrain in 2011 following the outbreak of protests as part of the Arab Spring.

These findings suggest that when the UN undertakes institutional capacity-building activities in entrenched authoritarian systems, it should do so with a clear understanding of the opportunities and risks involved and should have the management of elite interests as a central pillar of its strategy. This need not necessarily be at odds with other objectives of good governance such as increasing women’s political participation. Rather, in implementing its programmes, the UN should seek to gradually help increase the membership of the collective “elites” participating in the institutions and help plan for a post-transition scenario in which these interests can be accommodated in a new system. Continuity in the accommodation the elite bargain through democratic institutions will increase the chances that these institutions play a constructive role during and after a transition.

Building international leverage: The perennial problem of influencing political leaders to take difficult actions during non-crisis moments to avoid risks of future violence is perhaps most acute in countries with entrenched authoritarian leadership. The policy prescriptions to mitigate risk may be seen as directly in opposition to the leader’s interests, such as power-sharing or economic decentralization. Moreover, factors such as the concentration of the economy around a few extractive industries, bilateral economic sanctions and political shaming for human rights abuses can contribute to the political isolation of the entrenched State, rendering it less susceptible to “soft” pressure and diffusion of norms.

A common approach to building political engagement with a potential or current crisis is through the self-appointment of other States as “friends” of the country in question, either individually or as a “group of friends.” Though she focuses primarily on peacemaking,

Whitfield's finding on factors that contribute to the formation and impact of friends is instructive. She concludes that, when a situation is unfolding within a sphere of influence of a dominant regional power — for example, the conflict in Sri Lanka — the international community seems to fail at generating an individual champion or unified grouping to support conflict resolution. On the other hand, when regional political will is favourable to the resolution of conflict dynamics — for example, the conflict in East Timor and the engagement of Australia — the self-appointment of a “friend” to channel international political engagement is both common and usually effective.¹¹³

Whitfield further suggests that the composition of groups of friends is of high importance. Having a combination of Security Council members, development donors and regional actors allows a group of friends to bring to bear a combination of “political leverage with one or more of the conflict parties, financial assistance for relief and reconstruction, and the possible commitment of troops to the UN peacekeeping operation or alongside it.”¹¹⁴ Like Whitfield, Malone notes that groups of friends can play an important role in linking the operational prevention efforts of the Secretary-General and other UN officials with the political engagement of the Security Council, even helping to draft resolutions. At the same time, he notes that the leadership of a group of friends, and whether it is perceived as partial to one party into a dispute, can affect whether the group will have a unifying effect on the Council and in the international community more generally. For example, the group of friends of Western Sahara in the 1990s was widely perceived as biased towards the interests of Morocco, making it a polarizing player in the Council.¹¹⁵

In more recent years, the **Peacebuilding Commission** has played a related function in more formal terms. The Commission has established country-specific configurations in response to transition-related violence in, for example, Guinea-Bissau and Burundi, each chaired by a Member State. In other cases, such as Guinea and The Gambia, the Commission has elected to maintain more informal monitoring of the country. In both cases, the Peacebuilding Commission's engagement generally includes

visits to the country and messages to its leader; briefings to Commission members by UN officials; and funding from the Peacebuilding Fund for programming aimed at reducing risks of violence. The Peacebuilding Commission's longer-term engagement with countries makes it an attractive forum for monitoring and responding to transition-related risks in countries with entrenched political systems.¹¹⁶

Human rights monitoring and reporting:

Formal human rights reporting under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) may offer another entry point for the UN in pre-transitions settings. Some studies have indicated that the high degree of legitimacy of the UPR, alongside its inclusive approach involving civil society, have helped promote less violent pathways in transitions settings.¹¹⁷ One example of this was OHCHR's engagement in Zimbabwe ahead of Robert Mugabe's transition, which sent strong messages to all parties about the need to respect human rights. During the constitutional crisis in Burkina Faso, the deployment of human rights monitors to support a national commission of inquiry into violations against civilians committed by State security services, following the attempted coup in 2015, played an important role in assuring the public and civil society of the credibility of this mechanism as a means of addressing their grievances against the ruling party.

Electoral Assistance often offers rare and promising entry points for early engagement on transition-related risks within an entrenched authoritarian system. As noted above, authoritarian leaders often draw stability from periodic elections and will thus seek to maximize the perceived legitimacy of their electoral processes. While this presents a risk that the UN will be instrumentalized in a scheme to hold on to power, it also presents an opportunity to help genuinely open political space and broaden participation. For example, multiple recent UN electoral assistance projects in countries with entrenched authoritarian systems have helped establish, with the consent and often participation of government actors, inter-party forums for the purposes of sharing technical information on the conduct of elections providing a space for parties to raise concerns outside of the public discourse, promoting



the participation of women in the elections, and ensuring the inclusion of marginalized populations.¹¹⁸ As a secondary effect, such interactions provide an opportunity for UN to build relationships with a more diverse array of political actors than would otherwise be possible, creating important anticipatory relationships for engagement in the event of a transition. The same is true for initiatives to support civil society participation and for ongoing engagement with the country's electoral body to support the organization of the vote.

B. DURING TRANSITIONS

It is difficult to define the exact boundaries of the “transitional” period across cases, given the often messy and drawn-out ways in which entrenched authoritarian leaders exit power. In some cases, an apparent military coup will be reversed or a leader will die and be replaced by an heir, causing an immediate reversion to the previous conditions. For the purposes of this study, the authors were most interested in the transfer of power itself and will focus here on the immediate aftermath of such transfers.

Scaling up: Once a transition is underway, the first challenge faced by the UN is often to significantly scale up its engagement, a task that frequently falls to a small country team

with limited Headquarter support. When the UN is called upon to engage in a transition, the speed with which it can increase its capacities often plays a key role. For example, following the contested 2007 elections in Kenya, the UN, which up to that point had had little political engagement in the elections, was left scrambling to plan for mediation as inter-ethnic violence escalated. Ultimately, the speed with which a team led by Kofi Annan deployed to the country and consolidated international mediation efforts was credited with playing a critical role in helping to avert a descent into all-out conflict.¹¹⁹ While formal mechanisms are in place to adopt exceptional measures when the Secretary-General designates a situation as a crisis, in practice responses to transitions are often less formal and take place below the level of the Secretary-General. These include the declaration of “enhanced monitoring” in line with the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Standard Operating Procedure on Arrangements in Support of Crisis Response at the Field Level as was the case, for example, during the transition in Zimbabwe in 2017 and the electoral crisis in Gabon in 2016.

This challenge of scaling up points to the importance of building **anticipatory relationships**. These include relationships with opposition actors, which may in future form parts of the elite bargain and/or government,



as evidenced in Tunisia, where the overnight change in the country's political leadership in 2011 left UNCT members with few contacts in the Government. In addition to politicians, building relations with civil servants within State institutions can provide the UN with important contacts during a transition, as these officials often remain in office through multiple administrations. In recent years, the deployment of peace and development advisers/teams during pre-transition phases has helped to build relationships and strengthen the UN's political analysis, such as in Zimbabwe in 2017 and The Gambia in 2016. As described in further detail below, building deeper relationships with key regional players has been cited by the heads of the major regional offices in Africa (such as the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel — UNOWAS — and the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa — UNOCA) as having set up a crucial element of their prevention strategies at the moment of a crisis.

Understanding and engaging the elite power structure: As noted in Part II, the stability of an entrenched authoritarian regime is built and maintained through mechanisms whereby a leader controls the distribution of power and resources to a group of elites in exchange for their allegiance. This relationship is then reproduced downward via extensive patronage

networks and lines of influence. With the end of such a regime, the core of this network disappears, erasing with it the central logic that had held the political system together for decades. Understanding the political economy of these settings is crucial yet often a challenge given the political sensitivity, limited resources and the often development-focused nature of non-mission settings. The recent decision to systematically include economic expertise in Resident Coordinator offices under the reformed development system may help further.

In some cases, the UN can play a constructive role in reducing risk by **facilitating an elite bargain** in a transition period.¹²⁰ By identifying indispensable political actors and helping to bring them together to reach a viable arrangement, the UN can often reduce the immediate risks of escalation. Examples of this include the UN's mediation of the constitutional crisis in Burkina Faso in 2016, when the swift provision of UN Good Offices by UNOCA, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the UN established a forum for discussions among political actors that resulted in a new constitutional charter and established a transition plan leading to elections. The UN's continuing efforts to support Sudan's transition after the ouster of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 may offer another emerging example as well.

A path to safety for the ex-leader: As explained in Part II, factors that influence the path of a transition include the specific fate of the leader, including whether there are assurances about their legal and financial future, and the specific impact of prosecutions for crimes committed while in office. Here, the UN has often played a constructive role in a variety of ways. In Angola, for example, the UN provided support during the peaceful transition from the leadership of José Eduardo dos Santo. The transition maintained the one-party system and thus posed little immediate risk to the underlying power structure. However, it included significant political and economic reforms. These opened the path to greater transformation in the medium term, though the subsequent anti-corruption action against the dos Santos family could have the effect of discouraging other entrenched authoritarian leaders in the region to relinquish power. ECOWAS has a normative framework providing for guarantees to former Heads of State and their entourage; in The Gambia, a 2017 settlement secured the departure of Yaya Jammeh and included a written joint UN-African Union-ECOWAS statement noting that Yaya Jammeh's rights and those of his supporters would not be threatened and that their "lawfully-acquired" property would not be seized.

These deals are not always universally accepted. In Zimbabwe, the decision by transitional authorities to grant former Robert Mugabe and his wife immunity from prosecution and provide him with a generous retirement package was arguably a key factor in preventing African Union (AU) sanctions of the new political system but has been heavily criticized by some civil society actors. When there are allegations of widespread abuses that may arise to the level of gross violations of international human rights or humanitarian law, the mediator must walk a fine line between offering the leader a satisfactory path and upholding norms that prevent the UN from negotiating or endorsing immunity from prosecution, as codified in multiple UN General Assembly resolutions.¹²¹

Building regional and international leverage: When the prevention of violence and/or return to constitutional governance requires difficult

concessions from entrenched authoritarian leaders or opposition actors, international influence can take a variety of forms. Economic sanctions have in some cases been imposed by powerful countries and regional organizations on political systems with entrenched leadership for a variety of reasons, reasons ranging from direct opposition to the political regime such as (Cuba and Myanmar), to the prevention of nuclear proliferation (such as Iran and DPRK). The literature on the relationship between economic performance and authoritarian governance suggests that the imposition of economic sanctions should both increase political entrenchment and the likelihood of a leadership transition. However, there is some evidence that entrenched authoritarian systems are uniquely resilient to economic sanctions, as leaders have a variety of ways to transfer the costs of sanctions onto the general public with fewer political consequences. This may be less true for personalist regimes and for targeted sanctions against individual decision makers, where the costs of sanctions cannot be as easily transferred.¹²² In a few circumstances, the threat or enactment of UN or bilateral sanctions during transitions in countries with entrenched leadership has succeeded in encouraging the departing leaders to cooperate with political processes. For example, in 2011, members of the Security Council threatened to impose sanctions against Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen until he signed a Gulf Cooperation Council-mediated peace plan with Houthi rebels.¹²³ At the same time, as seen in the case of Zimbabwe, economic sanctions against States with deeply entrenched leadership can have the effect of pushing the country towards non-sanctioning economic allies, decreasing an international coalition's leverage during transition moments.

Since 2000, the AU has maintained a policy to sanction unconstitutional changes of government as a means of promoting the norm of constitutional rule. A 2015 study found that the AU suspended countries subject to coups 91 per cent of the time, and imposed sanctions in 73 per cent of the cases, nearly two thirds of which succeeded in restoring constitutional order.¹²⁴ In some cases, the AU has supported direct military intervention, such as the ECOWAS intervention in The Gambia in 2016, which proved effective at preventing violence.

Responding to early warning signs of potential instability and violence, the UN has had some success in direct personal appeals. For example, UNOWAS Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Mohammad Ibn Chambas appealed directly to Nigeria's Goodluck Jonathan's patriotism and legacy when asking him to accept the results of the 2015 presidential election, cognizant of the potential regionally destabilizing implications of a constitutional crisis in the country. Indirect personal appeals by Chambas also appeared to contribute to the decision by The Gambia's Yaya Jammeh to relinquish power in 2017. Likewise, SRSG Haile Menkerios worked with former President Thabo Mbeki and Ethiopian President Meles Zenawi to convince Omar al Bashir to accept the 2011 Southern Sudan referendum and avert a return to civil war.¹²⁵ In 2016, UNOCA SRSG Abdoulaye Bathily personally sought to dissuade Gabonese presidential candidate Jean Ping from calling for violence to enforce his claim electoral victory;¹²⁶ similarly, the UNOWAS SRSG appealed to Guinea's Sékouba Konaté's personal legacy as a force for peace when discussing recognition of the 2009 elections process amid escalating violence protests among opposition political parties at the conclusion of the country's transitional period.¹²⁷

C. IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRANSITIONS

Following a leadership transition, there may be a quick return to stability, a longer period of uncertainty or widespread violence. Many transitions result in a national process, such as a dialogue or a commitment to elections, which often cannot be conducted quickly. These periods following leadership transitions are especially risky, as new leaders and reconfigured political constellations settle into place. The window of opportunity to help shape developments is short. Often, the immediate burst of political activity by the UN subsides and international attention moves elsewhere, opening some settings to risks of relapse. This section examines some of the key considerations in the post-transition phase.

Supporting new administrations: When the UN is asked to support the long-term recovery and development of a country following a

transition from entrenched rule, it often faces a unique set of capacity challenges which, if not addressed during a relatively short window of opportunity, could imperil a new government's ability to maintain popular support, implement elements of the transitional political settlement, and manage political spoilers. As detailed above, there is a very high likelihood that the new government will fall into the same patterns of patronage and repression as the previous one. Where the government bureaucracy is perceived to be associated with the preceding regime's patronage network, an aspect of the political settlement may mean that the machinery of government be re-built from scratch, as was the case after the toppling of Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 2003, when the US-led occupying coalition instituted a policy of "de-Baathization" of the bureaucracy and military. This led to a radical reduction in State capacity, alongside disastrous political and security consequences that led to a spread of violent extremism. Similarly, the post-transition period in The Gambia required building an almost entirely new bureaucracy after years of calcification and patronage under Yaya Jammeh. Here, the UN experimented with several novel approaches, including projects supported by the Peacebuilding Fund to deploy communications expertise in Office of the President to advise on messaging around the transition and the secondment of a national expert with experience in managing transfers of administrations in nearby countries.

Encouraging inclusive dialogue and sustainability: The centrality of elite patronage networks to the logic of entrenched authoritarian rule renders elite bargains all the more important to the successful management of transitions.¹²⁸ However, a large body of evidence has shown that the sustainability of political settlements also relies on the inclusion of a broad representation of the population, including various ethnic groups, women, youth, religious leaders and other influential stakeholders.¹²⁹ International actors aiming to support dialogue towards a political settlement around a leadership transition in an entrenched authoritarian State face considerable challenges in promoting inclusive and viable dialogue processes. Political participation in the lead-up to a transition tends to be highly exclusive and limited to the elite circle of influence. Moreover,

the events triggering many transitions are not inclusive by nature: of the transitions in the post-Cold War period, nearly half involved little or no public discussion, having been brought about by the death of the leader or a coup. In many other cases during this period, the transitions triggered by a relatively spontaneous surge in informal public political participation following long periods of repression, leaving little opportunity for UN influence in the moment. Such cases include those that were a part of the Arab Spring, such as Egypt and Tunisia; the popular discontent brought about by economic downturns that ousted several Asian leaders in the 1990s, such as Malaysia and Indonesia; and protests in Africa sparked by attempts by entrenched leaders to further extend their rule, including Benin and The Gambia.¹³⁰ In many of these cases, the UN's capacity to help increase the inclusivity of the process was extremely limited; discussions of inclusivity were only possible once a bargain had been forged with those holding power at the crisis moment.

That said, there have been a few cases in the post-Cold War period in which national dialogue processes played a significant role in facilitating a peaceful leadership transition. In Benin, for example, where long-serving leader Mathieu Kérékou, facing an economic crisis and under pressure from the international community, established a relatively inclusive national dialogue process to agree on key concepts for the country's political future. Kérékou arguably underestimated the degree of dissatisfaction among participants in the dialogue, who opted to remove him from power in 1990 and require him stand in elections, which he lost and conceded peacefully.¹³¹

Our review of cases identifies **two windows of opportunity** on either side of the elite bargain for international actors to encourage more inclusive dialogue around the political settlements during a transition — one before the transition begins, and one in the immediate aftermath of the leader's departure. Prior to the transition, international actors may endeavour to broaden participation in the institutions used by the entrenched leader to formalize and guarantee their relationship with elites, including national legislatures, the judiciary,

government bureaucracy and political dialogue councils. This could include direct efforts to strengthen women's formal participation in these institutions or more indirect efforts to build the capacities of constituents to influence and constrain elites, for example by engaging religious leaders and former Heads of State from the region or by leveraging "non-traditional" mediation actors.¹³² As noted above, such strategies require a thorough understanding of the political economy of patronage in the country and can risk the unintended consequence of deepening the leader's entrenchment and enabling repression.

The second moment of opportunity to broaden formal inclusivity in the post-transition political settlement occurs following the beginning of the transition, and often after a new elite bargain has been negotiated. At this stage, the country is attempting to build a new social contract and secure a shared vision for the future of the country. Recent research and guidance propose a range of strategies for ensuring broad inclusion in post-crisis dialogue processes.¹³³ While the unique conditions for supporting inclusive dialogue in countries that have undergone transitions of entrenched authoritarian leadership is under-researched, this review of cases highlights several priority areas of consideration. These include issues of accountability and reconciliation for exclusion and injustices that may have persisted unaddressed for many years under repressive rule; broad inclusion of ethnic groups in the country's armed forces and bureaucracy; and opportunities for the growth of a more vibrant and representative civil society, as well as economic governance.

Holding actors accountable for commitments:

Following a transition, the mandate of the incoming administration often includes a major reform program emanating from a mediated settlement, election platform or national dialogue process. These programmes generally include measures to address perceived risks to stability that emerged under the entrenched leader, such as power-sharing across ethnic groups, security sector reform, and public financial management. They are forged during or shortly after the moment of high tension

and/or crisis surrounding an entrenched authoritarian leader's departure, during which the UN and other international partners may be closely engaged and enjoy peak influence over their national partners. Once a new political settlement has been enacted, the challenge becomes one of ensuring that all actors follow-through on their commitments and that future governments sustain the political will to enact difficult reforms.

Following the 2008 death of Guinea's Lansana Conté and the subsequent military coup, the UN, ECOWAS and AU were able help mediate a series of commitments contained in the Ouagadougou Joint Declaration of January 2010. In it, the military junta and the "*Forces Vives*" of Guinea agreed to a six-month "recovery" period in which a government of national unity would be formed, elections organized, and public rights respected. Once the transition period began, however, the UN became increasingly concerned that the parties were manipulating ethnic tensions, targeting political opponents with violence and preparing to reject the results of the vote if it did not go in their favour. These concerns came to a head following a presidential run-off vote in November 2010, when both parties alleged widespread malpractice; losing candidate Cellou Diallo refused to accept the results and violent demonstrations were met with a heavy-handed response by the security services. Fortunately, the UN-ECOWAS-AU mediation group was able to convince Diallo to abide by a Supreme Court ruling that ultimately saw Alpha Condé sworn in as President. An analysis of the preventive diplomacy efforts during this period found the following were key to ensuring a peaceful outcome: efforts to exclude spoilers — especially junta leader Dadis Camara — from influencing the political process; the coordinated leveraging of international donor support; and united UN-AU-ECOWAS political messaging.¹³⁴

Once a post-transition political system is in place, it quickly becomes extremely difficult to hold parties to account for their transition commitments. This is currently the case in The Gambia, where the UN has expressed concern

that the Government of Adama Barrow has been slow to implement important but challenging reforms to address key causes of instability at the time of the 2016/17 crisis. These include the ethnic re-balancing and right-sizing of the armed forces, the stabilization of the country's fiscal situation and a commitment to hold new elections sooner than constitutionally required, as he had promised to his fellow opposition coalition members. Here again, coordinated donor support to the fledgling government was assessed as an important source of the leverage for the international community, however in this case an opportunity was arguably lost in the early days of the transition. Shortly after Barrow's inauguration, the World Bank approved a one-off USD 56 million grant with minimal consultation with the UN and few conditions or monitoring arrangements. Better coordination around risks and priorities for the success of the transition might well have led to the parcelling-out of this grant over a longer period of time and in relation to certain benchmarks, including much needed reforms to the country's financial management system that remain unaddressed.¹³⁵

The precarious and non-linear pathways out of entrenchment for most States highlights the importance of **continued monitoring of risks** and sustained political engagement in post-transition countries. As noted in Part II, there is a very high likelihood that States that have transitioned from entrenched rule, especially entrenched personalist regimes that lack institutional capacities, will either return to authoritarian rule or will fail to sustain democratic gains in the long term. As such, risks to national stability and international peace and security will likely continue to be present long after an entrenched authoritarian leader has departed. The maintenance of an envoy in Yemen beyond the departure of Ali Abdullah Saleh has permitted the UN to remain actively engaged in the country through the many challenges the country has faced since. Conversely, limited space for engagement with Egypt following the removal of President Mubarak left the UN and other international actors with limited visibility of and influence over the events that led to the military coup of 2012.

Conclusions and Recommendations

On the basis of the above analysis, we here offer some broad conclusions and general recommendations for UN policymakers and practitioners considering transitions in entrenched political systems:

1 Bad governance does not mean bad transition.

There is no necessary relationship between poor governance in an entrenched regime and violence during a transition out of that political system. Instead, levels of violence appear more directly tied to the trigger for transition, the broader socioeconomic conditions in-country, and the forms of international engagement. Focusing too much on bad governance may mean missing out on the more relevant factors driving violence, whereas adding a political economy lens is far more likely to anticipate emerging risks. This does not mean governance is unimportant — in fact, it may be determinative in longer-term sustainability — but for immediate violence reduction it may be less important than current approaches presuppose.

2 Change is slow, relapse is likely.

Entrenched authoritarian systems have had decades to establish themselves and develop strong resilience against change. The likelihood of post-transition governments repeating the patterns of their predecessors is high and should

be closely monitored beyond the initial transition. Policymakers should be cautious in proposing quick fixes in the aftermath of transitions and should be humble in their attempts to impose new models too quickly. The present UN policy framework may create unrealistic expectations by focusing almost entirely on a quick shift to elections and constitutional rule.

3 Early presence can mean early analysis and action.

In many of the cases identified, the UN's longstanding presence in-country and/or in the region was seen as crucial in building anticipatory relationships and effective networks well ahead of transitions. The capacity to understand political dynamics during the pre-transition phase is critical to effective UN engagement; however, these resources are often prioritized elsewhere. UN programming such as electoral assistance, governance or civil society capacity-building projects should include a political analysis function.

4 Balancing violence/instability and democratic rights.

Transitional moments place the UN in the uncomfortable position of choosing between immediate risks of instability versus implicitly accepting further repression of democratic rights. Often the most expedient path to limiting violence may appear to be to support an

authoritarian government, possibly decreasing the longer-term prospects of a more inclusive governance system and enabling the denial of human rights more generally. Politically astute leadership is required to strike the right balance, as is policy guidance that facilitates frank discussions of the short- and medium-term risks.

5 Institutions matter.

Effective, legitimate and transparent State institutions appear to offer the most viable pathway from authoritarianism to more inclusive system. But institutions and ostensibly democratic processes are also an important modality for autocratic leaders to maintain their grip on power. The UN's traditional models of institutional support are highly susceptible to this diversion of resources and may well have been co-opted to bolster authoritarian regimes in a wide range of settings. At the same time, support that is highly targeted at a viable political process can assist in reducing risks during a transition. UN support to institutions and processes in these cases should be planned with this risk in mind and with a clear understanding of the objective of the support.

6 Leverage is often indirect.

Entrenched authoritarian systems are often resilient to external influence, especially traditional Western engagement that is typically seen as advancing a neoliberal agenda. Multilateral approaches involving tools like sanctions, large-scale convenings, and attempts to pressure new governments have a poor track record. Instead, leverage in advance of and during transitional moments must often be achieved indirectly, via regional or other players who have a more influential role in-country. Strategic alignment at the regional and international levels significantly improves the likelihood of success.

7 Understand the elite bargain.

The UN must understand the structure, membership and incentives of the elite patronage network in entrenched authoritarian

systems, given that power is often distributed outside of formal institutional channels. The capacity to analyse political, economic and even psychological factors is important in this regard, and UNCTs in the pre-transition phase should be able to generate such analysis. The ability of the UN to appeal personally to senior political actors, either directly or by marshalling influential figures, can be part of an effective strategy starting well before the transition.

8 Engage individual power brokers.

Personalities — of the leader and of members of his or her patronage network — matter. The ability to build relationships with and tailor engagement strategies around the unique personalities of individual power brokers may prove critical to a UN strategy. The UN should prioritize and build staff capacities in political engagement and mediation skills at all levels, and UNCTs in pre-transition countries with entrenched political systems should ensure that this skillset is present in their team.

9 Assess unity of international will and scope for influence.

Understanding the external factors that could potentially pull a country towards deeper entrenchment should form part of the UN's analysis and strategy making. The ways in which countries within regions influence and support each other can play an important role in determining a transition process and in shoring up autocratic regimes. In this context, the notions of “linkage” and “diffusion” should be well understood within the UN. Likewise, building a strong understanding of the composition of international groupings of political engagement in support of prevention activities is critical.

10 Maintain clear roles and responsibilities.

Division of roles across different UN actors can mitigate political resistance and maximize the collective impact of the UN pre-transition



countries with entrenched political systems. Often, maintaining a low profile while pursuing longer-term engagement strategies in-country can be paired with more robust external engagement and messaging. UNCTs should make maximum use of non-resident UN actors, including by sharing information and coordinating strategy.

11 Look for risks and opportunities around elections.

Elections are often high-risk moments for the stability of authoritarian systems. Elections and their aftermath may offer an opportunity to encourage the broadening of political dialogue and the evolution or renegotiation of the elite bargain, including as part of UN prevention engagements during this period. It also offers an opportunity for the UN to broaden its network, especially when it is seen as an honest broker.

12 Scale up support during the short window of opportunity after a transition but also hold the government accountable post-transition.

When supporting a country through the unpredictable period of a leadership transition, the UN should not leave planning for its relationship with a successor political system until the post-transition period. When the UN is asked to support the long-term recovery and development of a country following a transition from entrenched rule, it often faces a unique set of capacity challenges which, if not addressed during a relatively short window of opportunity, could imperil the new government's ability to maintain popular support, implement elements of the transitional political settlement, and manage political spoilers. The UN should assume that the new government will face pressures and incentives to backslide on its commitments, often needing to focus on its own precarious position to the detriment of other issues. Here, the UN should put in place measures to monitor and hold the government to account for its obligations to its citizens, including through the strategic leveraging of international assistance. The period during a transition may be the best time to begin such discussions, when the UN often enjoys its strongest leverage.

Annex I.

Post-Cold War Transitions of Power in Entrenched Authoritarian Systems

This list contains all “completed” leadership transitions that have taken place in entrenched authoritarian systems between 1990 and the present. To arrive at this list, the authors applied three variables. The first is the country’s Polity IV score at the year prior to the transition of power. This dataset is produced and annually updated by the Polity Project, a research consortium of quantitative academic researchers hosted by the non-profit Centre for Systemic Peace in Vienna. The dataset measures political systems positioning on an authority spectrum using a 21-point scale ranging from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy). The score consists of six component measures that record key qualities of executive recruitment, constraints on executive authority and political competition. For inclusion in this list, the authors required that the country’s Polity IV score be below 5, making it, according to the measures, an “anocracy” or “authoritarian regime” (a score of 5 to -5), or an “autocracy” (a score of -6 to -10).¹³⁶

The second variable is the leader’s time in power. With two exceptions, which the authors justified in endnotes, only countries with leaders who had been in power for at least fifteen years when they left office were included. This measure excludes countries with long-term Heads of State and where the leader departed after fulfilling two terms. It also excludes a significant number of countries that became independent in the post-Cold War period and often had leaders who

played a caretaker role until they were elected for two terms, notably many countries in the Caribbean.

Finally, the authors applied a third variable: the occurrence of leadership transitions. This is necessary to create a set of cases with clear “before, during and after” phases, which is critical to our objective of identifying challenges, risks and opportunities for the UN in each of these phases. This variable does, however, exclude countries where a transition may have been considered likely, and where the UN may have engaged to reduce risks of violence but where ultimately a transition did not take place. The authors have included discussions of such cases within the qualitative analysis where appropriate, for example the case of Gabon in 2016, where a political crisis was triggered by the presidential elections in September of that year and yet ultimately the existing leader remained in power.

As noted in Part II of the report, these two variables may not in and of themselves exhaustively isolate entrenched systems from other authoritarian political systems, for example in terms of levels of economic inclusion. Nevertheless, the authors consider that these two variables generate a satisfying approximation of the dataset, providing a basis for the study of trends in these transitions and international responses thereto in the post-Cold War period.

COUNTRY	LEADER	YEAR CAME TO POWER	DATE DEPARTED POWER	YEARS IN POWER	POLITY IV SCORE	NATURE OF TRANSITION	RESULTING POLITICAL SYSTEM	POLITICAL ACTIVITY DURING TRANSITION	VIOLENCE DURING TRANSITION
Benin	Mathieu Kérékou	1972	4-Apr-1991	19	-2	Removed by National Conference of 1990, defeated in presidential election in 1991	Democratic reforms	Limited political protest	● No violence
Mali	Moussa Traoré	1968	26-Mar-1991	23	-7	Coup d'état	Democratic reforms, elections	Coup	● Armed conflict inc. regional spill over
Ivory Coast	Félix Houphouët-Boigny	1960	7-Dec-1993	33	-7	Death in office	Continuation of existing constitutional order, tensions escalating some six years later	Limited political protest	● No violence
Korea, DPR	Kim Il-sung	1948	8-Jul-1994	46	-9	Death in office	Hereditary succession	No public protest	● No violence
Malawi	Hastings Kamuzu Banda	1964	24-May-1994	30	-8	Voted out of office.	Initially democratic reforms and elections	Widespread political protest	● No violence
Rwanda	Juvénal Habyarimana	1973	6-Apr-1994	21	-6.5	Assassinated	Civil war and genocide, followed by transitional arrangements and elections	Widespread political protest	● Armed conflict inc. regional spill over
Qatar	Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani	1972	27-Jun-95	23	-10	Coup	Continuation of existing constitutional order	No public protest	● No violence
Dominican Republic	Joaquín Balaguer	1986	16-Aug-1996	10+12	8 ¹³⁷	Resigned	No change in constitutional order, democratic elections	Widespread political protest	● No violence
Democratic Republic of Congo	Mobutu Sese Seko	1965	16-May-1997	32	-8	Expelled from the country by rebel forces	Civil war, violence, instability	Widespread political protest	● Armed conflict inc. regional spill over
Indonesia	Suharto	1967	21-May-1998	31	-7	Resigned	Political liberalization, democratic elections	Widespread political protest	● Widespread State/civil violence
Djibouti	Hassan Gouled Aptidon	1977	8-May-1999	22	-6	Retired	Continuation of existing constitutional order, elections	Limited political protest	● No violence
Guinea-Bissau	João Bernardo Vieira	1980	7-May-1999	19	5	Coup	Political liberalization, democratic elections	Coup	● Limited State/civil violence
Jordan	King Hussein	1952	7-Feb-1999	47	-2	Death in office	Hereditary succession	No public pretext	● No violence
Peru ¹³⁸	Alberto Fujimori	1990	22-Nov-2000	10	1	Resigned/impeached	No change in constitutional order, democratic elections	Widespread political protest	● Limited State/civil violence
Senegal	Abdou Diouf	1981	9-Apr-2000	19	-1	Voted out of office	Continuation of existing constitutional order	Limited political protest	● No violence
Syria	Hafez al-Assad	1971	10-Jun-2000	29	-9	Death in office	One-party system, dynasty	No public protest	● No violence
Kenya	Daniel arap Moi	1978	30-Dec-2002	24	-2	Retired	Continuation of existing constitutional order, elections	Limited political protest	● No violence
Iraq	Saddam Hussein	1979	9-Apr-2003	24	-9	Foreign intervention, deposition	Interim Government leading to democratic elections, military occupation	International intervention	● Armed conflict inc. regional spill over
Malaysia	Mahathir Mohamad	1981	16-Jul-2003	22	3	Retired	No change in constitutional order, democratic elections	Limited political protest	● No violence
Palestine	Yasser Arafat	1994	11-Nov-2004	10+25	...	Death in office	No change in constitutional order, democratic elections	Limited political protest	● No violence
Seychelles	France-Albert René	1977	14-Jul-2004	27	...	Resigned	Continuation of existing constitutional order	Minimal political protest	● Limited State/civil violence
United Arab Emirates	King Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan	1971	2-Nov-2004	33	-8	Death in office	Hereditary succession	No public protect	● No violence
Kyrgyzstan	Askar Akayev	1990	24-Mar-2005	15	-3	Fled, resigned	Democratic elections	Widespread political protest	● Considerable State/civil violence
Mozambique	Joaquim Alberto Chissano	1986	2-Feb-2005	19	5	Retired	Continuation of existing constitutional order, elections	No public protest	● No violence

COUNTRY	LEADER	YEAR CAME TO POWER	DATE DEPARTED POWER	YEARS IN POWER	POLITY IV SCORE	NATURE OF TRANSITION	RESULTING POLITICAL SYSTEM	POLITICAL ACTIVITY DURING TRANSITION	VIOLENCE DURING TRANSITION
Saudi Arabia	King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud	1982	1-Aug-2005	23	-10	Death in office	Hereditary succession	No public protest	● No violence
Togo	Gnassingbé Eyadéma	1967	5-Feb-2005	38	-2	Death in office	Continuation of existing constitutional order, some democratic reform	Limited political protest	● No violence
Kuwait	Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah	1977	15-Jan-2006	29	-7	Death in office	Hereditary succession	No public protest	● No violence
Turkmenistan	Saparmurat Niyazov	1990	21-Dec-2006	16	-9	Death in office	Return to democratic elections	Minimal political protest	● No violence
Cuba	Fidel Castro	1959	24-Feb-2008	49	-7	Resigned in ill health	Maintenance of one-party system	No public protest	● No violence
Guinea	Lansana Conté	1984	22-Dec-2008	24	-1	Died while in office	Military coup, period of instability, some violence	Coup	● Considerable State/civil violence
Maldives	Maumoon Abdul Gayoom	1978	11-Nov-2008	30	...	Lost elections	No change in constitutional order, democratic elections	Limited political protest	● No violence
Gabon	Omar Bongo	1967	8-Jun-2009	42	-4	Death in office	Some violence during the transition	Widespread political protest	● Limited State/civil violence
Egypt	Hosni Mubarak	1981	11-Feb-2011	30	-3	Resigned	Elections, followed by coup	Widespread political protest and revolution	● Considerable State/civil violence
Korea, DPR	Kim John-il	1994	17-Dec-2011	17	-10	Death in office	Hereditary succession	No public protest	● No violence
Libya	Muammar Mohammed Abu Minyar Gaddafi	1969	20-Oct-2011	42	-7	Foreign intervention, deposed, killed	Interim Government, ongoing fighting, no return to full constitutional order	Civil war and international intervention	● Armed conflict inc. regional spill over
Myanmar	Than Shwe	1992	30-Mar-2011	19	-6	Retired	No change in constitutional order, democratic elections	Limited political protest	● Limited State/civil violence
Singapore	Goh Chok Tong	1990	21-May-2011	21	-2	Retired	No change in constitutional order, democratic elections	No public protest	● No violence
Tunisia	Zine el Abidine Ben Ali	1987	14-Jan-2011	24	-4	Deposed	Violence before and during transition, can be considered to have successfully replaced an autocratic Government with a stable more democratic Government	Widespread political protest. Violent riots, forced from office following mass street protests (Jasmine Revolution)	● Considerable State/civil violence
Ethiopia	Meles Zenawi	1991	20-Aug-2012	21	-3	Death in office	Continuation of existing constitutional order	Limited political protest	● No violence
Yemen	Ali Abdullah Saleh	1978	27-Feb-2012	34	-2	Resignation	Ostensibly, elections and return to parliamentary rule; parallel (Houthi) Government	Widespread political protest	● Armed conflict inc. regional spill over
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Denzil Douglas	1995	18-Feb-2015	20	...	Voted out of office	No change in constitutional order, democratic elections	Limited political protest	● No violence
Uzbekistan	Islam Karimov	1989	2-Sep-2016	27	-9	Death in office	Interim administration, ongoing	Limited political protest	● No violence
Angola	Jose Eduardo dos Santos	1979	17-Aug-17	38	-2	Retired	Continuation of existing constitutional order, elections	Limited political protest	● No violence
The Gambia	Yahya Abdul-Aziz Jammeh	1994	21-Jan-17	23	-5	Voted out of office	Constitutional democratic Government, regional peacekeeping force	Widespread political protest	● Limited State/civil violence
Zimbabwe	Robert Mugabe	1980	15-Nov-17	37	4	Coup	Mostly a continuation of existing constitutional order	Coup	● Limited State/civil violence
Algeria	Abdelaziz Bouteflika	1999	2-Apr-19	20	2	Resigned	Ongoing, elections	Widespread political protest	● Limited State/civil violence
Kazakhstan	Nursultan Nazarbayev	1990	20-Mar-19	29	-6	Retired	Continuation of existing constitutional order	Limited political protest	● No violence
Sudan	Omar Hasan Ahmad al-Bashir	1989	11-Apr-19	30	...	Coup	Violence before and during transition, ongoing	Widespread political protest	● Limited State/civil violence (to date)

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- 136 See, Montry Marshall, Ted Robert Gurr and Keith Jagers, *Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2018: Dataset User's Manual* (Vienna: Centre for Systemic Peace, 2019), <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html>. For the most recent transitions, we use the most up-to-date score available.
- 137 Joaquín Balaguer ruled the Dominican Republic for a total of 22 years with an eight-year interval between his second and third term. The level of political repression under his rule, particularly during his first two terms, and the circumstances of his removal from office lead us to exceptionally include this case in the dataset.
- 138 While Alberto Fujimori only spent 10 years in power, his departure was precipitated by an attempt to alter the country's political institutions to enable him to seek to remain in power. The similarities between this situation and those of other countries with deeply entrenched political systems and longer-serving leaders leads us to include this case in the dataset exceptionally.



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