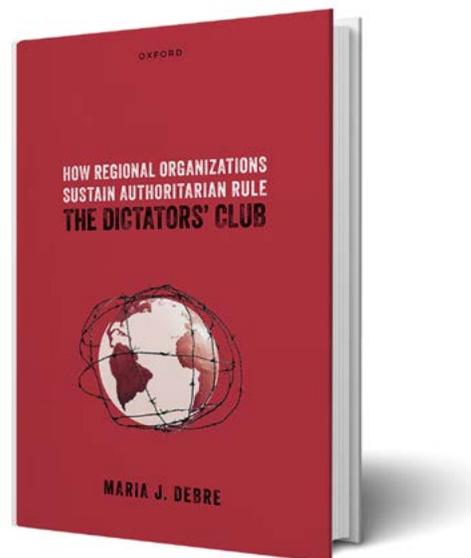


intelligence in public media

The Dictators' Club *How Regional Organizations* *Sustain Authoritarian Rule*

Reviewed by Tony Sutton

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Autocratic regimes can limit their risk of democratization by joining together in regional organizations, argues Maria Debre in her new book, *The Dictators' Club: How Regional Organizations Sustain Authoritarian Rule*. Her careful and valuable contribution makes for a specialist's read, advancing an analyst's understanding of regime survival strategies and of international organizations. Going explanations for autocracies' longevity focus primarily on internal factors, often structural. A minority of explanations look outward, considering the disposition of great powers and the effects of geopolitical patrons or aid donors. The role of regional organizations was less well charted before this first effort from Debre, a scholar of international relations at Zeppelin University in Germany.

The book's strength is original quantitative analysis correlating regime survival with membership in regional organizations. Debre borrowed, combined, and extended several extant references to construct a project-specific dataset characterizing 72 multinational regional organizations that pursued political, economic, or security mandates between 1945 and 2020. A subset of those

regional organizations qualified as dictators' clubs whose member countries averaged low scores on a democracy index.

Debre analyzed the survival patterns of 119 autocratic regimes that were ever members in these regional organizations, applying a bevy of controls and robustness checks. Autocratic regimes were less likely to be replaced by democracies if other members of their regional organizations were more deeply autocratic. Regimes were just as likely to be replaced by another autocracy, however, regardless of the degree of autocracy among fellow members in regional organizations.

Case studies illustrate possible mechanisms by which dictators' clubs protect autocratic members, but here the evidence shifts from conclusive to exploratory. One hypothesized mechanism is that regional organizations redistribute resources that autocratic members can use to fund patronage, repression, or social spending. The Gulf Cooperation Council, for example, provided money

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The Dictators' Club

and ultimately security forces to put down protests in Bahrain in 2011.

A second way autocracies protect each other within regional organizations is by vetoing attempts to hold members to democratic standards. Spoiler roles are particularly important in heterogeneous regional organizations like the Southern African Development Community, whose democratic members moved to criticize Zimbabwe for flawed elections in 2002 and 2008, but whose autocratic members approved only milquetoast statements.

A third protective mechanism is when regional organizations shield autocratic regimes from broader international pressures. For example, a Venezuela-led organization bankrolled Nicaragua after international donors withdrew aid during 2008–11 to punish democratic backsliding. Regional partners also blocked other organizations, like the UN, from taking action.

The case studies leave a murky theory for how regional organizations help autocracies survive. A simple challenge is that proffered explanations overlap, as when regionally supplied resources shield against international pressure. A more complex problem is that

the cases suggest each explanation might only operate in the right circumstances. A regional organization's capabilities perhaps must match a regime's survival needs, which range from a reprieve from international condemnation, to lenient election observers who endorse rigged votes, to funds that tide over a poor regime, to a borrowed army that suppresses a people's movement. In many cases, it is not clear whether such help must come from a regional organization as such, or whether it would serve just as well from a single country.

If readers come away still pondering how dictators' clubs help autocracies survive, Debre has at least given them an empirical pattern to contemplate. Regional organizations with mostly autocratic members apparently create or reveal some factor that insulates autocratic regimes from democratization. This new piece of knowledge is most useful to an analyst already assembling other parts of the puzzle. By meticulously establishing a new statistical fact, the book advances its field with the sort of tantalizingly partial triumph that typifies social science. ■