

# Winning the Game of Thrones: Leadership Succession in Modern Autocracies

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## Abstract

Under what conditions can dictatorships manage peaceful leadership transitions? This article argues that constitutional succession rules are critical for modern dictatorships, contrary to the predominant scholarly focus on hereditary succession or parties. An effective succession rule needs to solve dual problems of peaceful exit and peaceful entry. First, the rule must enable incumbents to exit power peacefully by reducing coup threats. Second, the rule must empower the designated successor to ensure that they can enter power peacefully. Constitutional rules help solve both problems, and are particularly effective when they appoint the vice president as the designated successor. The vice president's access to material resources deters other factions from challenging the succession procedure, whereas designating successors without a power base is ineffective. Using original data on constitutional rules in African autocracies, I show that regimes that formally designate the vice president as the successor are more likely to undergo peaceful transitions.

## Keywords

leadership succession, authoritarian regime, constitutional rules, Africa

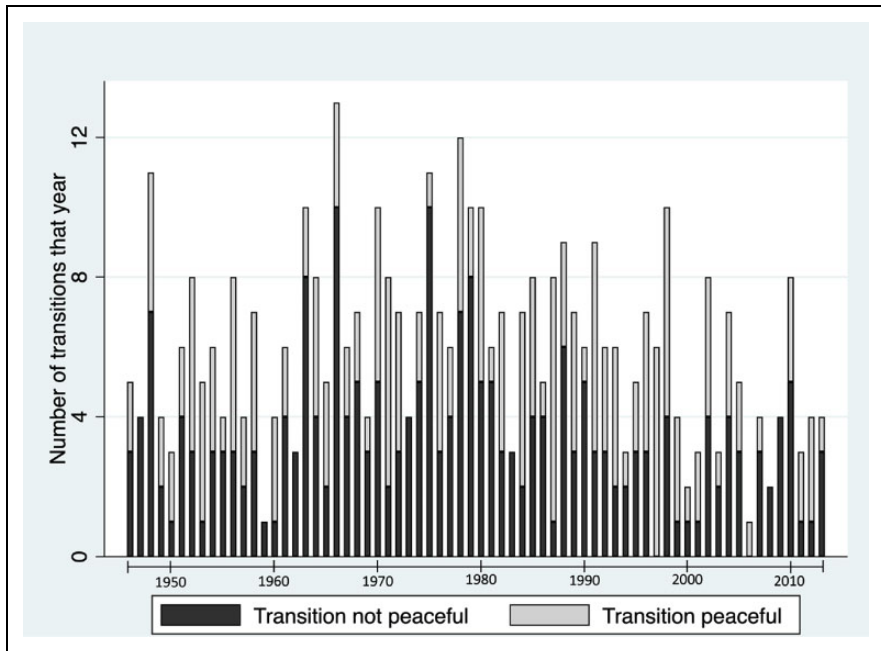
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**Figure 1.** Autocratic leadership transitions, 1946 to 2014.

Leadership succession is a fundamental and existential challenge facing all authoritarian regimes. Unlike democracies, one of the defining characteristics of dictatorships is the absence of free and fair elections as a mechanism for leader selection. The succession challenge in autocracies is often exacerbated when strongman dictators declare themselves “president for life” and evoke images of divine rule, suggesting that they are essentially irreplaceable. However, all leaders, even those who are president for life, die at some point. Regimes cannot survive unless they are able to pass power from one leader to another. As Figure 1 shows, the majority of modern autocracies are not able to live up to this task. From 1946 to 2014, only 44 percent of autocratic leadership transitions were peaceful and resulted in the continuation of the regime after the departure of the incumbent. For the remaining 56 percent of regimes, leadership succession was violent (including coups)—either because the incumbent was deposed or because the successor failed to take power. In such instances, the regime was unable to survive past the tenure of an individual dictator. Why are some autocratic regimes able to transfer power peacefully from one leader to another, while others cannot?

Despite the centrality of succession for long-run autocratic regime stability, there are surprisingly few studies dedicated to this topic. Most of the existing literature has focused almost exclusively the role of hereditary succession, especially in early

European monarchies (Abramson and Rivera 2016; Herb 1999; Kurrild-Klitgaard 2000; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014, 2020; Tullock 1987). A small number of studies that mention non-hereditary solutions to succession argue that ruling parties play an important role in facilitating peaceful leadership transitions (Brownlee 2007; Geddes 1999; Magaloni 2008).

However, both of these proposed mechanisms fail to explain leadership succession in modern autocracies. First, hereditary succession is incredibly rare in post-World War II dictatorships. Out of all autocratic leadership transitions that occurred between 1946 to 2014, hereditary succession occurred less than 3 percent of the time (author's calculations based on Archigos data). Second, ruling parties are extremely common in dictatorships, yet many are very weak organizations. In fact, most ruling parties are unable to outlive the death or departure of the founding leader, therefore rendering the party unable to regulate the subsequent transfer of power (Meng 2019).<sup>1</sup>

This article argues that we cannot understand succession in modern autocracies without studying the content of constitutions. I claim that constitutional rules that designate a formal successor play a critical role in promoting peaceful leadership transitions in dictatorships. When succession rules do not exist, elites anticipate eventual conflict over the leadership transition and are incentivized to preemptively grab power while the incumbent is still in office. Succession rules reduce this coup threat by creating a focal point—the designated successor—for elites to coordinate around. Moreover, once named, the designated successor has a strong incentive to protect the existing regime, providing a “barrier effect” for the incumbent. Leaders avoid being overthrown by their own successors (also known as the crown prince problem) by *strategically* picking deputies who are strong enough to help protect them against external coup plots, but *not strong enough* to unilaterally overthrow them. Succession planning through the adoption of constitutional rules therefore enables incumbents to exit power peacefully.

However, the succession process does not end there. In order for a leadership transition to be peaceful, the outgoing leader must exit office peacefully, *and the incoming leader must successfully take power*. In many instances, the incumbent dies peacefully while in office, only to result in violent conflict over the future of the presidency. We cannot know the conditions that allow for peaceful leadership transitions without understanding how successors take power. For the regime to survive, the incoming leader must “win the game of thrones.”

Here, I argue that only *some types of succession rules*—specifically those that empower the incoming leader via access to real de facto power—are *effective* at ensuring that the designated successor will ascend to the presidency. Succession rules vary in their content: some constitutions appoint the vice president as the designated successor, while others may appoint the president of the legislature as the designated successor. Yet these seemingly small institutional differences lead to very different outcomes. The office of the vice president is a powerful position. It is a top cabinet post, second only to the president, and comes with a lucrative stream of

patronage and access to key state functions. Using these material advantages, the vice president can cultivate his own independent base of support while the incumbent is still in power, which raises the cost of rebelling against him during or after the leadership transition.

By contrast, constitutional rules that designate a position *without significant material resources and power* as the successor are largely ineffective at bringing that person to power. The president of the legislature, a position that is not in the executive, lacks the material resources of a high-level cabinet seat and is far from the apex of power. As a result, it is much more difficult for successors in this position to consolidate enough power to ascend to the presidency following the departure of the incumbent. Altogether, my theory suggests that while a broad range of constitutional rules can help incumbents ward off coup threats, ensuring that the successor comes to power is a much taller order, and only *some* constitutional arrangements facilitate this outcome.

I show empirical evidence of these arguments using original data on constitutional succession rules and the appointment of successors in 46 African countries from 1960 to 2010. Sub-Saharan Africa is a rich context in which to examine this puzzle because it is a region that is often plagued by coups and violent leader deposals, yet many African leaders have also experienced peaceful transfers of power. Moreover, virtually every country in Africa was authoritarian for decades after independence, and there is much variation in the content of constitutions across countries and over time.

Consistent with my theory, I find that leaders with constitutional succession rules are significantly less likely to be deposed, and this is true regardless of the position of the designated successor. However, *only* regimes with constitutional rules naming the vice president (“VP rule”) as the designated successor are significantly more likely to undergo peaceful leadership transitions. Moreover, I show evidence that the mechanism through which this occurs is by empowering the designated successor—vice presidents are much more likely to ascend to the presidency following the departure of the incumbent compared with successors in other positions. The size of the effect is quite substantial: the inclusion of the VP rule increases the likelihood of a peaceful leadership transition by 56 percent. While regimes without the VP rule have only a 11 percent chance of a peaceful leadership transition, regimes with the VP rule have a 67 percent chance of a peaceful leadership transition. By contrast, the presence of a constitutional succession rule designating a position *other* than the vice president does not appear to have a significant effect in promoting peaceful leadership transitions.

This study makes a number of important contributions to theories of authoritarian survival, comparative constitutions, and African politics. This article is the first to explain how and when constitutional rules empower incoming leaders, allowing them to successfully take office—a crucial element for peaceful leadership transitions. Virtually all existing research has focused only on explaining the peaceful *exit* of incumbents by showing that succession planning decreases the probability of elite

coups (Frantz and Stein 2017; Kurrild-Klitgaard 2000; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014; Tullock 1987). Yet ensuring peaceful incumbent exit is only half of the (metaphorical) battle. In order for the regime to survive, the incoming leader must successfully and peacefully take power. This is not an easy task. In 22 percent of all autocratic leadership transitions from 1946 to 2014, peaceful incumbent exit was followed by a violent seizure of power. In contrast with existing scholarship, this article is the first to disaggregate the leadership transition outcome and examine the conditions that allow successors to come to power.

Second, this article shows that constitutions *matter*, even in dictatorships. Scholars have only recently acknowledged that authoritarian constitutions are not merely window dressing. Constitutions can play a meaningful role in regime maintenance by creating observable signals that elites can coordinate around (Albertus and Menaldo 2012; Barros 2002; Ginsburg and Simpser 2014; Myerson 2008). However, empirical studies of authoritarian constitutions have rarely examined variation in the *content* of constitutional rules. This article demonstrates that the content of constitutional rules is critical in determining the outcome of leadership succession. It is often not enough to simply have *any kind* of succession plan; the regime must have the *right kind* of succession plan in order to bring the successor to power. Constitutions matter, not because they establish de jure rules, but when they affect de facto political power.

Third, this article has important implications for African politics. Existing scholarship on leadership succession in Sub-Saharan Africa has generally held a pessimistic view about the prospect of peaceful and constitutional leadership transitions, especially in the decades prior to democratization in the early 1990s (Dionne and Dulani 2012; Posner and Young 2007). Coups were long considered the modal type of leadership change in Africa, and this was particularly true during the Cold War era (Decalo 1976). In fact, an early study even referred to the challenge of succession as the “Gordian Knot of African Politics” (Sylla and Goldhammer 1982). In their influential volume on African regimes, Jackson and Rosberg (1982) predicted that leadership succession will continue to be resolved by informal (and often violent) power politics, rather than institutionalized rules. By contrast, this article demonstrates that not all leadership transitions that take place within autocracies in Sub-Saharan Africa are unregulated or driven solely by violence. Rather than serving as empty parchment institutions, constitutional rules can play an important role in regulating the transmission of executive authority, even during the most authoritarian decades of rule.

## Succession Planning in Modern Dictatorships

There have been surprisingly few studies documenting how modern autocracies<sup>2</sup> govern leadership transitions. Despite scholarly focus on monarchies and hereditary succession, familial transfers of power are incredibly rare in post-World War II dictatorships. Only 6 percent of all autocratic regimes from 1946 to 2010 are coded

as monarchies, and out of those monarchies, only seven remain in power today (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). In non-monarchical regimes, less than 3 percent of direct power transfers occur between family members. Even political dynasties are surprisingly rare. Only 5 percent of all autocratic leaders worldwide have any family ties with earlier incumbents (author's calculations based on Archigos data by Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009).

Instead of hereditary succession, modern autocracies often use constitutional rules to regulate leadership transitions. Before discussing how succession rules promote peaceful leadership transitions, I first describe what these rules typically look like and highlight some important differences across constitutions.

A typical constitutional succession rule outlines formal procedures to replace the leader in the case of the incumbent's death, resignation, or permanent incapacity. Importantly, the rule will often designate an interim leader, which is understood to be the designated successor. For instance, the 1963 Kenyan constitution (Chapter II, Part I, Section 6) included a clause that states:

1. If the office of President becomes vacant by reason of the death or resignation of the President . . . an election of a President shall be held within the period of ninety days immediately following the occurrence of the vacancy.
2. While the office of the President is vacant, the functions of that office shall be exercised –
  - a. By the Vice President

A number of recent studies have highlighted the role of constitutions in supporting autocratic rule, departing from earlier scholarship that disregarded autocratic constitutions as merely “window dressing.” Constitutional rules play a powerful role in regulating autocratic leadership transitions by serving as an “operating manual” (Przeworski 2014). Unlike democracies, dictatorships do not have a ready-made system of replacing leaders and in the absence of formal succession plans, elites may be tempted to seize power through force. Indeed, coups are the most common way in which autocratic leaders lose power (Svolik 2012). Autocratic constitutions help solve this dilemma by describing *how* the government should function in the case of the president's absence or departure, providing a “blueprint” for elites and other key regime forces, such as the military, to follow (Barros 2002; Ginsburg and Simpser 2014).

Autocratic constitutions promote authoritarian stability through two key mechanisms: information and coordination. Dictatorships are often characterized by secrecy and a lack of transparency. When rules are not written down, it is unclear whether the dictator has engaged in wrongdoing, making it difficult for elites to coordinate a response. Constitutions solve this coordination problem by creating a *publicly observable* set of rules (Albertus and Menaldo 2012). Rulers can use constitutions to make promises to share spoils and power with elites (often by limiting their own executive power), and the establishment of clear mutual expectations allow elites to credibly threaten to sanction the leader if he violates these rules (Myerson 2008; Weingast

1997). Through these two mechanisms, constitutions can stabilize power sharing agreements between leaders and elites (Albertus and Menaldo 2012; Gandhi 2008). Elite cohesion, in turn, deters popular uprisings and protects the regime against unrest from the masses (Levitsky and Way 2002; Slater 2010).

These mechanisms also help facilitate leadership transitions by identifying and legitimizing the designated successor. Leadership transitions are periods with high levels of uncertainty. When a leader dies or steps down from office, key regime actors such as the cabinet, military, and courts, look for clear signals to determine their response. Constitutions, which are publicly observable, serve as a useful coordination tool and also impart a sense of *de jure* legitimacy to the designated successor (Ginsberg and Simpser 2014). In fact, when the 2012 presidential transition in Malawi was challenged by a rival faction, the military and courts quickly backed the constitutional successor, Joyce Banda, citing the constitution as the main reason for their decision (Dionne and Dulani 2012). Without the support of these key actors, attempts to sidestep the planned succession failed.

However, constitutional succession rules vary in their content, and these institutional differences lead to very different leadership transition outcomes. First, some succession rules are vague and do not identify a specific successor. For instance, from 1960 to 1975, the constitution of Chad included a rule stating: “In case of death or permanent incapacity of the Head of State, the ministers undertake the current affairs of the office under the supervision of one of the ministers as designated for this purpose by the Council of Ministers.” Despite having some language about a succession procedure, this rule does not identify who the designated successor will be, which does not solve the coordination problem of identifying a new leader to rally around.

In fact, I argue that constitutional succession rules are self-enforcing *only when* they identify a designated successor. The creation of a formal succession hierarchy consolidates a new distribution of power—the designated successor becomes a focal point for elites to coordinate around (Meng 2020). Moreover, as I will discuss in the next section, successors gain significant *de facto* power through their access to state resources. This combination of *de jure* legitimacy with *de facto* power allows constitutional successors to build their own base of support in preparation for the leadership transition. As Albertus and Menaldo (2012) argue, “a constitution can enable the rise of a *new autocratic coalition*” (283, emphasis added).

A second important way in which constitutional rules differ is the *position* that is identified as the designated successor. Vice presidents are most commonly identified as the constitutional successor, reflected in the Kenya example provided above. This is unsurprising, given that the office of the vice president is the top cabinet position, second only to the president. In my sample of African regimes, the vice president was designated as the official constitutional successor for 61 percent of country-year observations.<sup>3</sup>

There are a very small number of observations in which the constitution designates the prime minister as the successor (though counter-intuitively, such regimes

remain presidential systems). In the African context, the office of the prime minister is *equivalent* to that of a vice president—the prime minister is appointed by and subordinate to the president. Countries have *either* a vice president or prime minister, but not both. I will refer to this number-two position in the regime as the “vice president” position for the remainder of the article, but readers should know that this shorthand also includes a small number of prime ministers.

Constitutional rules also frequently name the president of the legislature as the designated successor. For example, the constitution of Senegal from 1960 to 1975 included a rule stating: “The President of the Republic shall be replaced by the President of the National Assembly in the event of resignation, incapacity, or death.” In my sample, 34 percent of country-year observations designated the president of the legislature as the constitutional successor.

A very small number of cases identify some other position, such as the general secretary of the ruling party or the president of the supreme court, as the successor. As I will argue in the next section, different offices come with varying access to state resources, which in turn, affects the successor’s ability to come to power after the incumbent departs. To sum, constitutional rules vary in their content, and these institutional differences lead to divergent outcomes.

It is helpful to address concerns about endogeneity. Identifying the effect of institutions that are not randomly assigned is a difficult and endemic problem in the study of politics (Pepinsky 2014). Readers may wonder whether the underlying dynamics motivating elites to create succession policies in the first place is driving leadership transition outcomes, rather than the institutions themselves. On one hand, it is possible that leaders who are extremely stable in their rule and anticipate having a peaceful leadership transition are the only actors who feel secure enough to create explicit succession policies. If this is the case, then the relationship between succession policies and peaceful leadership transitions is simply a reflection of the regime’s stability and not the independent effect of institutions on leadership transitions.

However, a leader who is *already* secure and anticipates a smooth succession has no reason to create succession policies since a peaceful leadership transition is possible *without* institutions. In fact, studies of endogenous institutional creation argue that leaders create power sharing institutions *only when* faced with a credible threat of rebellion from elites (Boix and Svolik 2013; Meng 2020; Paine 2020). Leaders who do *not* face a credible threat of removal can remain in power whether they create institutions or not.

We should therefore expect incumbents who are *most likely* to experience *violent* leadership transitions to create succession policies. In fact, this logic also answers the question: if planning for succession promotes regime durability, then why don’t all dictators plan for succession? Leaders who feel quite secure in their positions are less likely to formalize succession procedures because such incumbents are not at risk of being deposed, even if they do not designate a line of succession. Existing research shows this empirical pattern in Africa: founding leaders who come to power



with exceptionally high levels of popularity and legitimacy are significantly less likely to create constitutional succession rules (Meng 2020). The strategic logic of institutional creation thus alleviates concerns that the observed effects of institutions are merely reflections of underlying power dynamics, rather than the effect of succession planning.

## **How Succession Planning Promotes Peaceful Leadership Transitions**

Autocratic leaders face a general dilemma when deciding whether to plan for succession. On one hand, not having succession rules can pose a grave threat to leaders. When there is no clear plan governing the future leadership transition, elites anticipate eventual conflict over succession. They may be tempted to seize power while the incumbent is still in office to preempt the eventual power vacuum (Frantz and Stein 2017; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014). The creation of a clear line of succession therefore deters elites looking to capitalize on future uncertainty from staging coups during the autocrat's reign.

However, planning for succession can *also* create a serious threat for the incumbent: the crown prince problem. Herz (1957) famously argued that by grooming a successor, incumbents create their own worst enemy. The mere designation of an alternative center of power makes leaders vulnerable to being deposed prematurely by their own chosen successor. By naming a successor, the ruler voluntarily shifts the center of power away from himself, putting himself at risk of being overthrown by his own appointee.

To counter these dual threats, I argue that leaders strategically appoint successors who are *strong enough to help shield them against external coup plots, but not strong enough to unilaterally overthrow them*. As I will discuss further in the next section, incumbents often set up succession plans to benefits *themselves*, but not necessarily their successors. The crown prince problem looms large in the dictator's mind, and this persistent threat affects the institutional design of succession planning.

### ***Authoritarian Stability: How Succession Planning Reduces Coup Threats***

Succession planning through the creation of a constitutional rule reduces the likelihood that the incumbent will be overthrown. First, there is the "coordination effect." Succession rules deter coups by reducing elites' incentives to preemptively grab power while the leader is still in office. When there is no clear designated successor, elites anticipate eventual conflict over succession and may prefer to strike early to "lock in" their position. Naming a successor eliminates the temptation to stage a preemptive coup. Constitutional rules that lay out a succession hierarchy create a focal point by identifying the next leader, which solves the elite coordination problem surrounding the leadership transition (Frantz and Stein 2017; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014).

Second, succession rules also promote autocratic stability through the “barrier effect.” Once named, designated successors have a strong incentive to protect the existing regime against external threats, providing a “barrier” for the incumbent. When leaders designate a successor, this deputy is incentivized to protect the existing regime, since preserving the status quo is the best guarantee that they will become the next leader. The designated successor therefore “constitutes an additional hurdle for contenders who aim at taking over the power from the incumbent” (Konrad and Mui 2017, 2159).

Moreover, access to material resources through cabinet appointments allow successors to begin consolidating their authority while the incumbent is still in office. Designated successors are often high-level cabinet ministers, and these cabinet appointments provide elites with *de facto* power. Cabinet ministers have access to material resources and the ability to shape policy, allowing them to target patronage directly to their supporters. This access to *de facto* power and resources allows the successor to cultivate their alliances and consolidate their own base of support.

When the successor is empowered, they become an even more valuable ally for the incumbent in deterring coup threats. When successors are able to cultivate their own base of support, this raises the coordination cost of launching an outside rebellion. Not only would an elite challenger have to successfully overcome the incumbent and his supporters, would-be coup plotters also must contend with the successor and his supporters. Altogether, this decreases the probability that a coup would succeed.

To sum, the “coordination effect” and “barrier effect” constitute two key coup-proofing mechanisms. When there is doubt that a coup attempt will succeed, this doubt becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The outcome of coup attempts often rests critically on the military’s perception of its success (Singh 2014). In determining who to side with in during a coup attempt, soldiers are primarily concerned with avoiding unnecessary bloodshed. Military actors therefore cast their support for the side they believe will win.

Maintaining elite cohesion also deters popular uprisings and protects the regime against societal unrest. Although successful revolutions are much rarer than coups, discontent that starts at the top can trickle down with dangerous consequences. Elite defections are known to be one of the primary drivers of regime breakdown (Haggard and Kaufman 1997; Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Furthermore, regimes are more capable of suppressing popular discontent when elites are unified (Slater 2010). Altogether, these arguments yield the first testable hypothesis.

**H1:** Incumbents with constitutional succession rules should be less likely to be deposed compared with incumbents without constitutional succession rules.

The reader may wonder if an additional coup threat may emerge if elites who were *not* chosen to be the successor feel slighted. Such threats are offset by two factors. First, elites who wish to rebel against the leader and his successor still face

an unresolved coordination problem: who among them will replace the incumbent? Second, once a successor is named, the probability that any other elite can successfully carry out a coup drops significantly. Not only will the successor side with the incumbent in the event of a challenge, the successor gains influence and resources through the cabinet position he now controls. To sum, although the designation of a successor eliminates the possibility for other elites to assume the presidency, “the victims of this arrangement are relatively few compared with the number of beneficiaries of an orderly succession” (Zeng 2020, 773).

### *The Crown Prince Problem: How Incumbents Strategically Plan for Succession*

As discussed above, constitutional rules that identify a successor protect the incumbent against *external* threats, primarily coups that result from anticipated succession conflict. However, by appointing a formal successor, the incumbent now faces a possible *internal* threat from his own deputy. Why wouldn't the successor, once named, take advantage of his new stature and overthrow the incumbent? In fact, the very mechanisms that make the successor a strong ally against outsider coups, also make this appointee the most dangerous usurper.

Rulers have two options to avoid the crown prince problem. The first option is to designate a strong office (such as the vice president) as the constitutional successor but appoint a somewhat weak elite to that position. An alternative option is to design the constitutional rule so that the designated successor is a position with weaker authority (such as the president of the legislature). I now discuss each strategy in turn.

First, the ruler may choose to appoint a somewhat weak successor who is not strong enough to unilaterally overthrow him.<sup>4</sup> Appointees who are not strong enough to depose the leader are incentivized to wait patiently for the incumbent to die or retire, rather than try to capture power preemptively through a coup. By picking a somewhat weak challenger as the designated successor, the incumbent gets the added protection of having a “barrier” against external coup plots without putting himself at risk for being overthrown by his deputy. Weak challengers may include politicians who belong to an ethnic or religious minority or a relative newcomer who lacks a large support base. Elites without ties to the military can also be considered weak challengers, since coercive actors are best placed to successfully carry out coups (Meng and Paine 2020).

Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, followed such a strategy. Kenyatta's vice president and constitutional successor, Daniel arap Moi, was not a member of the dominant ethnic group in the country. Furthermore, Moi was not perceived to be a particularly shrewd politician, and elites would often make “Moi jokes” behind his back (Bienen and van de Walle 1991, 6). Although appointing a somewhat weak successor does limit the successor's ability to defend the leader against external

threats, this is a tradeoff that incumbents are willing to make since the strategy sidesteps the crown prince problem.

Second, an alternative strategy is to design the constitutional rule so that the designated successor is a *position* with weaker authority. Recall that in Sub-Saharan Africa, the two most common constitutional successor appointees are the vice president or president of the legislature. However, these two offices are quite different in the amount of resources that they control. While the vice president is a powerful position with access to material resources, the president of the legislature is a much weaker position in comparison.

The office of the vice president is the top cabinet position, second only to the president. Vice presidents are paid lucrative salaries, given control over government contracts (which they can reward to their supporters), and control key policymaking decisions. These resources and high-level influence provide the vice president with *material* power, which they can use to “reward allies and eliminate rivals” (Hughes and May 1988, 14). Vice presidents also benefit from the *symbolic* nature of the post: as the number two position in the regime, vice presidents often perform functions associated with the office of the president, such as leading cabinet meetings or conducting official state visits to other countries (Zeng 2020). As a result, the vice president is a natural focal point for succession.

By contrast, the president of the legislature comes with significantly less material resources and influence—and this is particularly true in the autocratic context. The position is not in the executive branch of the regime, and since it is not a cabinet office, lacks access to state resources. This position is further weakened by the fact that many authoritarian legislatures are considered rubber-stamp institutions. Since material resources constitute a key way in which successors can expand their support base, the president of the legislature is much more limited in his ability to consolidate power. In authoritarian regimes, and this is especially true in the African context, the cabinet—not the legislature—is the true source of power and material resources (Arriola 2009). Therefore, in order to avoid the crown prince problem, rulers would sometimes appoint the president of the legislature as the designated successor.<sup>5</sup>

To sum, rulers have two options to ensure that their designated successor is not strong enough to single handedly overthrow them. First, they can designate a strong office (such as the vice president) as the constitutional successor but appoint a somewhat weak elite to that position. Second, they can designate a weaker office (such as the president of the legislature) as the constitutional successor. Both of these strategies constitute the incumbent’s optimal solution when facing dual threats of outsider coups and the crown prince problem. However, these differences in institutional design affect the successor’s ability to come to power.

### *Taking the Throne: Empowering Successors*

While incumbents prefer to keep their successors somewhat weak, this strategy creates a challenge for the leadership transition: successors that are *too* weak are

less likely to succeed in coming to power. Taking the proverbial throne is not easy. In the Africa sample, 37 percent of peaceful incumbent exits result in the breakdown of the regime over succession conflict. The most straightforward way in which a peaceful leadership transition can occur is for the designated successor to become the next leader. When there is disagreement over the succession hierarchy, the regime faces the possibility of coup attempts (Frantz and Stein 2017) or worse, the outbreak of civil wars (Kokkonen and Sundell 2020).

I argue that constitutional rules that empower the successor by providing him with access to material resources are more effective in bringing that deputy to power. In particular, vice presidents are in a stronger position to ascend to the presidency, compared with successors in positions with a weaker power base, such as the president of the legislature. Since the office of the vice president is the highest cabinet position, successors in this position can utilize material resources to consolidate support, even if they were not inherently a particularly strong elite.

This mechanism is illustrated by the first transition of power in Kenya. Kenyatta, the founding president of Kenya, appointed Moi as his vice president and constitutionally designated successor in 1967. Moi did not begin his tenure as vice president in a position of strength—he was not a member of the dominant ethnic group that controlled the government. In 1976, a faction that opposed Moi proposed that the constitutional succession rule be changed so that the vice president would not serve as the interim president. Moi responded by obtaining statements of support from 88 MPs, 10 cabinet ministers, and the Attorney General (Karimi and Ochieng 1980; Widner 1992). The proposal to change the constitutional rule quickly failed, and Moi took office in 1978, following the death of Kenyatta. While the constitutional succession rule provided Moi with *de jure* legitimacy, the office of the vice president armed him with *de facto* power. As Tamarkin (1979) summarizes: “The anti-Moi group suffered a severe setback in its attempt to assert itself. If they thought of pursuing their struggle they would have to do it against the backdrop of a *grim political reality* and with a *debilitating constitutional constraint*” (24 emphasis added).

By contrast, constitutional rules that designate a successor without significant material resources (such as the president of the legislature) are largely ineffective at bringing that person to power. While this strategy may protect incumbents from being unseated by their own successor, it ultimately dooms the regime by failing to empower the incoming leader. In fact, interestingly, constitutional rules that do not empower the designated successor can actually *invite* conflict following the death of the incumbent if another elite with sufficient *de facto* power (such as the vice president) can mount a credible challenge for the throne.

This tension between *de facto* power and *de jure* rules is illustrated in the first presidential transition in Cote d'Ivoire. The founding president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, famously wary of the crown prince problem, waited until a few years before his death to create a constitutional succession rule. The rule appointed the president of the national assembly, Henri Bédié, as the lawful successor (but Houphouët did not publicly endorse him). In 1991, a power struggle over the impending succession

emerged between Bédié and Houphouët's prime minister, Alassane Ouattara. Two factions, one supporting Bédié and the other supporting Ouattara emerged during this period (McGovern 2011). Houphouët died in 1993 and Bédié assumed the presidency. However, six years later, Bédié was ousted in a coup that was staged by members of the military who were linked to Ouattara (Rabinowitz 2018).

It is useful to note the death of the incumbent is not always how leadership transitions occur. Leaders sometimes voluntarily choose to retire, often due to health reasons. This occurs 31 percent of the time in my sample. However, regardless of the incumbent's method of exit, successors cannot simply rely on their predecessor's support to bring them to power. Incumbents design succession plans to ensure the stability of their *own* reign, and such plans often center around putting successor in a somewhat weak position. Whether the designated successor is able to ascend to the presidency depends on their ability to amass their own support base.

To sum, constitutional rules vary in the extent to which they are effective at bringing the successor to power. Since peaceful leadership transitions require the incumbent's exit *and* the incoming leader's entry to be peaceful, empowering the designated successor is key. I therefore expect constitutional rules naming the vice president as the designated successor ("VP rule") to be more effective at promoting peaceful leadership transitions compared with regimes with no constitutional succession rules at all.

**H2a:** Regimes with the VP rule should be more likely to undergo peaceful leadership transitions compared with regimes with no constitutional succession rules.

By contrast, since constitutional succession rules that name someone *other* than the vice president as the designated successor ("Other rule") do not empower the successor, I predict that such rules will be *ineffective* at promoting peaceful leadership transitions. I expect that regimes with the Other rule will not differ substantially in the rate of peaceful leadership transitions from regimes with no constitutional succession rules at all.

**H2b:** Regimes with the Other rule should undergo peaceful leadership transitions at similar rates as regimes with no constitutional succession rules.

The final hypothesis addresses the mechanism of bringing the designated successor to power. While the previous two hypotheses focus on whether the leadership transition will be peaceful, they do not assess whether the leadership transition went according to plan. In particular, *H2a* and *H2b* do not require that the *designated successor* take office; as long as the incoming leader assumes power peacefully, it is considered a peaceful leadership transition. However, as I argue before—disagreement over the succession order is dangerous and often results in coups or the outbreak of civil war. The safest way in which a peaceful leadership transition can occur is for the regime to have a succession plan and *follow it*.

Therefore, for my final hypothesis I focus not only on whether the leadership transition was peaceful, but whether it went *according to plan*—meaning the designated successor did indeed take office following the departure of the incumbent. Here I argue that regimes with the VP rule should be more likely to undergo peaceful *planned* leadership transitions compared with regimes with the Other rule, since the VP rule more effectively empowers successors.

**H3:** Conditional on having succession rules, regimes with the VP rule should be more likely to undergo peaceful **planned** leadership transitions compared with regimes with the Other rule.<sup>6</sup>

While *H2a*, *H2b*, and *H3* make distinctions between the efficacy of the VP rule and the Other rule for promoting peaceful leadership transitions, *H1* does *not* distinguish between the effect of these two different types of succession rules at preventing incumbent disposal. As I argued earlier, a critical factor in preventing coups is ensuring that there is no uncertainty about the line of succession. If elites anticipate a future power vacuum upon the death of the incumbent, then they may be tempted to seize power preemptively while the leader is still in office. Constitutional succession rules solve this dilemma by identifying the next leader and stabilizing expectations. Importantly, the successor does *not* need to be particularly strong in order for the “coordination effect” and “barrier effect” to take hold. I therefore expect both types of succession rules, the VP rule and Other rule, to be effective in preventing incumbent overthrow.

## Data and Descriptive Statistics

I now provide empirical evidence of my theory using original data on succession planning and leadership transitions in all authoritarian regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa from 1960 to 2010.<sup>7</sup> The data is cross sectional, and the unit of analysis is the leadership transition. A leadership transition is observed if the outgoing leader departed office between 1960 and 2010.<sup>8</sup> If a leader was still in power as of 2010 but has exited office since, I include the transition observation in my dataset. If a leader was still in power as of 2010, and still remains in power today, I do not include the leader in the dataset because the leadership transition is unobserved. If a country becomes coded as a democracy following the departure of a leader, then that leadership transition is not included in the study because the mechanisms of leadership selection are different under democracy. The full list of leaders included in this study is reported in Online Appendix Table 3.

## Dependent Variables

There are three main dependent variables in this study. The first dependent variable, *Incumbent deposed*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the incumbent’s method of exit is coded as “Irregular” by Archigos.<sup>9</sup>

The second dependent variable, *Transition peaceful*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the leadership transition is peaceful. I use the following rules to identify peaceful leadership transitions: (1) the outgoing leader has an immediate successor following their departure from office; (2) *incumbent deposed* is coded as 0; (3) the method of entry for the incoming leader is coded as “regular” by Archigos and (4) the incoming leader remains in office for at least a year. I do *not* require the incoming leader to be the designated successor in order for the leadership transition to be coded as peaceful. As long as the outgoing leader leaves office peacefully and the incoming leader takes power peacefully (regardless of whether they were the designated successor or not), I code the leadership transition as peaceful.

Non-peaceful leadership transitions occur *either* if the outgoing leader was deposed, or if the incoming leader takes power through coercion or extra-constitutional means. For instance, Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, was deposed in a coup six years after taking office—a clear case of a non-peaceful transition. Leadership transitions can also be non-peaceful if the outgoing leader exits office peacefully, but conflict over succession emerges and the incoming leader does not take power peacefully. The first president of Guinea, Sekou Toure, died of a heart attack on March 26, 1984. Although the Prime Minister, Louis Lansana Beavogui, became the acting president following Sekou Toure’s death, the military seized power in a coup eight days later.

The third dependent variable, *Transition planned*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the leadership transition is peaceful *and* went according to plan. *Transition planned* is coded identically as *Transition peaceful*, except for two things. First, in addition to the four criteria listed for *Transition peaceful*, *Transition planned* requires a fifth criterion: that the incoming leader is the designated successor identified in the constitutional succession rule. Second, I do not code a value of this variable for observations in which there was no constitutional succession rule.

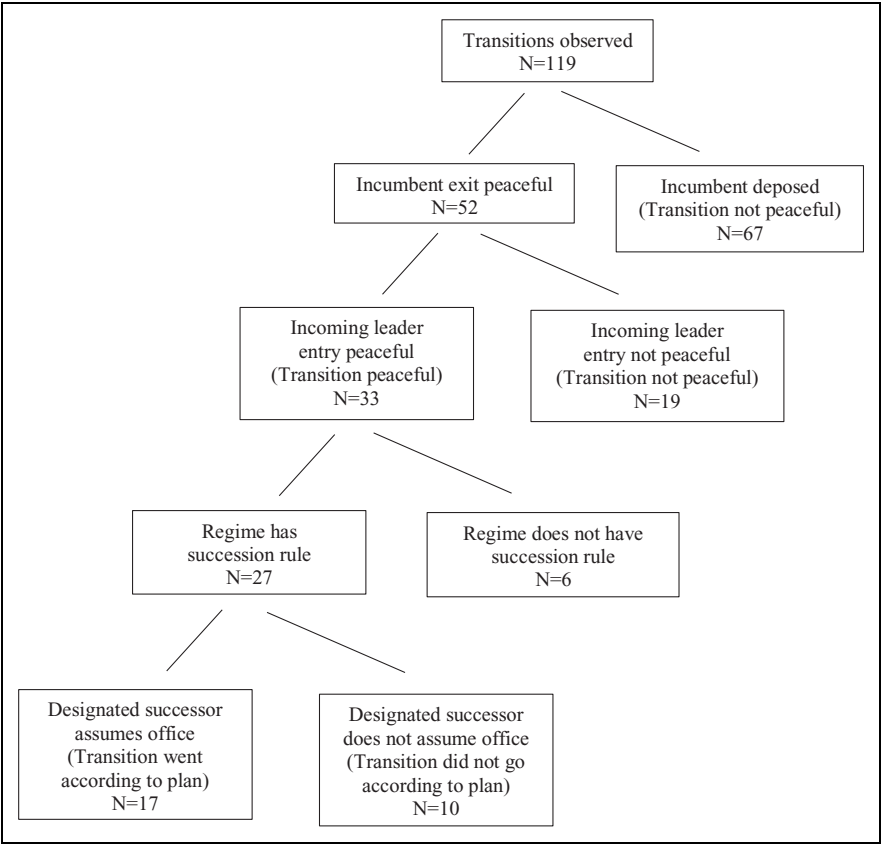
*Transition planned* requires that the designated successor assumes office successfully following the peaceful departure of the incumbent, while *Transition peaceful* only requires that the incoming leader take office peacefully, whether they are the designated successor or not. *Transition planned* takes a value of 0 either if the leadership transition was not peaceful or if the leadership transition was peaceful but the incoming leader was not the constitutionally designated successor. The structure of the data is illustrated graphically in Figure 2.

### *Independent Variables*

For my independent variables, I collected original data on constitutional succession rules and designated successors in 46 African countries between 1960 and 2010. For each country in my dataset, I recorded whether the constitution had a succession rule and if so, who the designated successor was.<sup>10</sup>

Using this constitutional data, I create a number of independent variables. *Succession Rule*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the regime had a





**Figure 2.** Data structure.

constitutional rule that clearly identifies the designated successor. I only consider succession rules that were in place in the years leading up to the leadership transition. If, for example, a leader had succession rules at the start of his tenure, but then eliminated them before exiting office, then these rules would not have been in place to facilitate the transition.

I also disaggregate the *Succession Rule* variable by creating two additional variables that record *who* the designated successor was. *VP rule* is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the regime had a constitutional rule stating that the vice president is the designated successor. *Other rule*, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the regime had a constitutional rule stating that someone *other than* the vice president is the designated successor. For both of these variables, I only consider succession rules that were in place in the years leading up to the leadership transition.

In addition to my main independent variables, I also include a number of controls that reflect leader, regime, and country-level characteristics. Table 1 includes a list of all the variables used in the empirical analysis, variable descriptions, and summary statistics.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

The resulting data includes 119 leadership transitions that occurred between 1960 and 2010 in Sub-Saharan Africa. Smooth leadership transitions do not occur easily: only 28 percent of leadership transitions in my sample were peaceful. The data emphasizes the importance of understanding how successors take power peacefully: in 37 percent of cases, peaceful incumbent exit was followed by a violent seizure of power. 45 percent of cases in my sample had a succession rule; 68 percent of these rules named the VP as the designated successor (VP rule) and 32 percent of these rules named someone other than the VP as the designated successor (Other rule).

Descriptive statistics quickly reveal that regimes with constitutional succession rules are associated with peaceful leadership transitions. 51 percent of cases with constitutional succession rules undergo peaceful leadership transitions, while only 10 percent of leadership transitions without succession rules are peaceful. The VP rule is especially effective: 64 percent of regimes with a VP rule underwent peaceful leadership transitions. Online Appendix Table 4 provides cross tabs of leadership transition outcomes and succession rules.

A number of interesting descriptive findings emerge from the data. The first important observation is that hereditary succession in Sub-Saharan Africa is quite rare, and this runs contrary to perceptions of the region as largely governed by nepotism and patrimonial rule. Only 7 percent of power transfers (whether peaceful or not) occur between family members. Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of these cases were violent transfers of power: instances where leaders were deposed by their own relatives. Out of 8 observations of familial transfers of power, only 3 were peaceful. Even family dynasties occur very infrequently—only 8 percent of leaders have any family ties with earlier incumbents. Hereditary succession is not a common mechanism that is used to regulate leadership transitions in Africa.

A second important descriptive finding is that the crown prince problem does not occur: incumbents are *not* overthrown by their designated successors. To determine this, I focus on the subsample of the data where the incumbent was deposed *and* had a constitutionally designated successor, of which there are 17 cases. For these cases, I identified the designated successor at the time of overthrow as well as the identity of the individual(s) who overthrew the incumbent. In all of the cases, the person who staged the coup was not the designated successor.<sup>11</sup> This finding provides empirical support for my argument that incumbents strategically weaken their successors to counter the crown prince threat.

A third important observation is that nominally democratic institutions—namely constitutions and ruling parties—are incredibly common in dictatorships, and these

**Table 1.** Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics.

Variable	Variable Description and Notes	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<b>Dependent Variables</b>						
Incumbent deposed	Takes a value of 1 if outgoing leader was deposed	119	.563	.498	0	1
Transition peaceful	Takes a value of 1 if outgoing leader exit is peaceful and incoming leader ascension is peaceful	119	.277	.449	0	1
Transition planned	Takes a value of 1 if the transition was peaceful and the incoming leader was the designated successor, conditional on succession rules existing	53	.32	.471	0	1
<b>Independent Variables</b>						
Succession rule	Takes a value of 1 if regime had a constitutional rule designating a specific order of succession at the time of the transition	119	.445	.499	0	1
VP rule	Takes a value of 1 if regime had a constitutional rule stating that the VP is the designated successor at the time of the transition	119	.302	.461	0	1
Other rule	Takes a value of 1 if regime had a constitutional rule stating that someone other than the VP is the designated successor at the time of the transition	119	.142	.351	0	1
<b>Control Variables</b>						
Constitution	Takes a value of 1 if regime had a constitution at the time of the transition, Source: Elkins, Ginsburg, and Melton (2010)	119	.932	.251	0	1
Ruling party	Takes a value of 1 if regime had a ruling party at the time of the transition, Source: Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) and African Elections Database	119	.890	.313	0	1
Leader duration	Number of years the outgoing leader was in power at the time of the transition	119	11.873	8.842	3	42
GDP per capita	Value recorded for the year of the transition. Source: Vogt et al. (2015)	114	1.548	2.003	.179	10.49

*(continued)*

**Table 1.** (continued)

Variable	Variable Description and Notes	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Oil production per capita	Value recorded for the year of the transition. Source: Vogt et al. (2015)	114	.343	1.226	0	7.654
Population (logged)	Value recorded for the year of the transition. Source: Vogt et al. (2015)	114	8.835	1.245	6.196	11.636
Ethnic fractionalization	Value recorded for the year of the transition. Source: Vogt et al. (2015)	114	.683	.231	.035	.925
Cold War	Takes a value of 1 if transition fell on or prior to 1991	119	.504	.502	0	1
British	Takes a value of 1 if country was a former British colony	119	.352	.479	0	1
French	Takes a value of 1 if country was a former French colony	119	.436	.498	0	1

institutions alone do not explain variation in regime durability. 93 percent of cases in my sample had a constitution at the time of the leadership transition, and 89 percent of cases had a ruling party at the time of the leadership transition. These patterns extend beyond Africa; from 1946 to 2008, 87 percent of all authoritarian regimes maintained a ruling party, and 93 percent had a constitution. Moreover, these trends are not simply a post-Cold War phenomenon. From 1946 to 1990, 84 percent of all authoritarian regimes had ruling parties, and 92 percent had constitutions. Yet the modal post-World War II leadership transition was violent. Simply having a constitution or ruling party is not sufficient in regulating peaceful transfers of power.

## Empirical Analysis

The empirical analysis is broken down into three main parts. First, I show that general succession planning decreases the likelihood that the incumbent will be deposed (*H1*). Second, I provide evidence of my main argument: *that the VP rule promotes peaceful leadership transitions (H2a and H2b)*. Third, I show evidence of the mechanism: the VP rule increases the likelihood that the designated successor will come to power, which ensures a peaceful and orderly leadership transition (*H3*). All the baseline regressions are estimated using logistic regression models with robust standard errors clustered by country.

### What Determines Peaceful Incumbent Exit?

I first show that leaders who plan for succession are significantly less likely to be deposed (Table 2). The main dependent variable for this set of regressions is

**Table 2.** Was the Incumbent Deposed?

DV: Incumbent Deposed	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Succession rule	-1.890*** (0.461)		-1.736*** (0.500)		-1.052^ (0.579)	
VP rule		-2.238*** (0.525)		-2.126*** (0.606)		-1.432* (0.664)
Other rule		-1.257* (0.597)		-0.949^ (0.565)		-0.497 (0.824)
Constitution			0.713 (1.164)	0.714 (1.185)	0.654 (1.136)	0.852 (1.185)
Ruling party			-2.033 (1.145)	-1.989 (1.155)	-1.618 (1.182)	-1.632 (1.159)
Leader duration			-0.045 (0.024)	-0.051* (0.025)	-0.040 (0.031)	-0.042 (0.031)
GDP per capita					-0.600* (0.282)	-0.570 (0.292)
Oil production					-0.141 (0.205)	-0.110 (0.217)
Population					-0.249 (0.190)	-0.319 (0.224)
Ethnic frac					-0.050 (1.574)	-0.056 (1.595)
Cold War					0.789 (0.545)	0.951 (0.590)
British					0.067 (0.732)	0.212 (0.764)
French					0.454 (0.713)	0.222 (0.772)
Constant	1.139*** (0.287)	1.139*** (0.287)	2.831 (1.548)	2.862 (1.551)	4.601 (2.738)	5.009 (2.840)
Observations	119	119	119	119	114	114
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.144	0.159	0.200	0.220	0.299	0.306

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. Logistic regression used in all models.

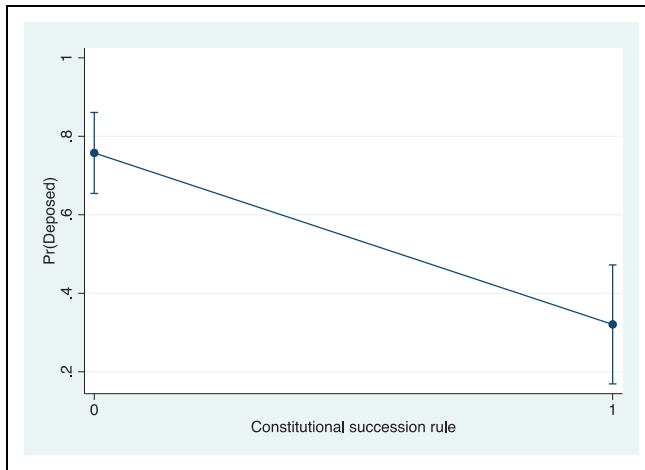
\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

^ $p < 0.10$ .

**Incumbent Deposed**, and the results show that the presence of a constitutional succession rule significantly decreases the likelihood that the incumbent will be overthrown. Moreover, the disaggregated version of the succession rules show that both the VP rule and Other rule have a significant effect in decreasing the likelihood of overthrow, although Other rule is not robust to the inclusion of the full set of controls. The presence of a constitution or ruling party does not have a significant effect in preventing the incumbent from being deposed, even in models that include



**Figure 3.** Probability that the incumbent will be deposed.

a limited set of controls. The magnitude of the effects is not trivial; succession rules decrease the probability that the incumbent will be overthrown by 44 percent. Figure 3 plots the predicted probabilities (and 95 percent confidence intervals) of incumbent overthrow conditional on having or not having succession rules.

I also find that succession rules are effective in protecting the incumbent against challenges from above and below. In Online Appendix Table 5, I disaggregate the ways in which incumbents are overthrown into Coups versus External Challenges (which consist of popular uprisings and removal by rebel groups). Incumbents who have succession rules are significantly less likely to be deposed, regardless of whether the challenge emerges from within the regime or from external societal forces.

### *When Will Leadership Transition Be Peaceful?*

I now provide evidence for my main argument: the VP rule promotes peaceful leadership transitions. The dependent variable for this set of regressions is *Transition peaceful*, and Table 3 reports results of the logit analysis.<sup>12</sup> The VP rule significantly increase the probability that the leadership transition will be peaceful, and this effect remains robust to the inclusion of the full set of controls. However, unlike the previous findings, Other rule is never significant—even in the model without any controls at all. While the Other rule may help incumbents ward off coups, it does not significantly improve the regime’s prospects for a peaceful leadership transition. I also find that having a *vague* succession rule does not have a significant effect on the probability of a peaceful leadership transition (Online Appendix Table 7).

**Table 3.** Was the Leadership Transition Peaceful?

DV: Transition Peaceful	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Succession rule	2.340*** (0.545)		2.258*** (0.531)		1.866** (0.625)	
VP rule		2.873*** (0.571)		2.957*** (0.711)		2.619** (0.978)
Other rule		1.124 (0.776)		0.669 (0.728)		0.826 (0.945)
Constitution			-0.811 (1.146)	-0.840 (1.199)	-0.957 (1.265)	-1.730 (1.476)
Ruling party			0.934 (1.181)	0.778 (1.357)	0.071 (0.802)	0.320 (0.717)
Leader duration			0.056 (0.030)	0.080* (0.034)	0.074 (0.044)	0.083 (0.051)
GDP per capita					1.873* (0.746)	1.990* (0.921)
Oil production					-1.035 (0.551)	-1.205 (0.727)
Population					0.356 (0.354)	0.540 (0.380)
Ethnic frac					3.334 (2.502)	3.298 (2.541)
Cold War					0.518 (0.629)	0.240 (0.640)
British					-1.597 (1.154)	-2.175 (1.241)
French					-1.803 (0.977)	-1.354 (1.227)
Constant	-2.303*** (0.447)	-2.303*** (0.447)	-3.101 (1.771)	-3.284 (1.856)	-9.130* (4.045)	-10.356* (4.460)
Observations	119	119	119	119	114	114
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.191	0.247	0.234	0.312	0.487	0.511

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. Logistic regression used in all models.

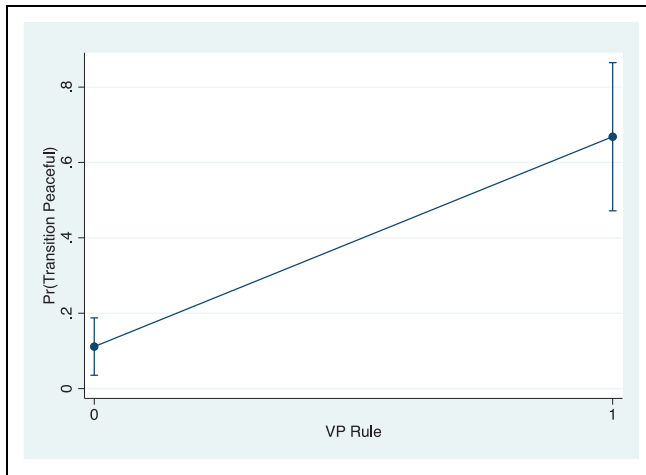
\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

The magnitude of the VP rule is large: it increases the probability of a peaceful leadership transition by 56 percent. While regimes without the VP rule have only a 11 percent chance of a peaceful leadership transition, regimes with the VP rule have a 67 percent change of a peaceful leadership transition (Figure 4).

Having a constitution or a ruling party also does not appear to have a significant effect on leadership transitions. In fact, these two variables are never significant in any subsequent robustness checks. One potential concern is that parties may be



**Figure 4.** Probability that the transition will be peaceful.

especially weak in Sub-Saharan Africa—particularly during the early decades immediately following independence. To show that the absence of a party effect is not simply an artifact of weak parties in Africa, I analyze a global sample of leadership transitions from 1946 to 2008 and find that the presence of a ruling party does not increase the likelihood of a peaceful leadership transition (Online Appendix Table 8).

My findings also remain consistent over a number of other robustness checks:

- Dropping short VP spells (Online Appendix Table 9)
- Excluding country-years without constitutions (Online Appendix Table 10)
- Using a count version of the independent variables, rather than dummy variables (Online Appendix Table 11)
- Restricting time-frame to Cold War years only (Online Appendix Table 12)
- Excluding observations where the prime minister is the designated successor (Online Appendix Table 13)
- Using inherited (rather than created) succession rules (Online Appendix Table 14)
- Using a Heckman selection model, rather than a logit model (Online Appendix Table 15)

### *The Mechanism: Bringing Designated Successors to Power*

In this final subsection, I focus on the mechanism of bringing the designated successor to power. The most straightforward way in which a peaceful leadership transition can occur is for the regime to have a succession plan and *follow it*—



**Table 4.** Did the Leadership Transition Go According to Plan?

DV: Transition Planned	(1)	(2)
VP rule	2.549** (1.084)	2.289* (1.183)
Leader duration		0.134** (0.068)
GDP per capita		0.971** (0.422)
Oil production		-0.632* (0.358)
Population		-1.319** (0.536)
Ethnic frac		14.974** (6.739)
Cold War		1.646 (1.309)
British		3.623** (1.542)
French		4.154*** (1.461)
Constant	-2.773*** (1.014)	-10.647* (5.562)
Observations	53	51
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.142	0.549

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. Logistic regression used in all models. Only cases with a constitutional succession rule are included in these regressions. Since all of these observations had a constitution and a ruling party, I exclude those control variables.

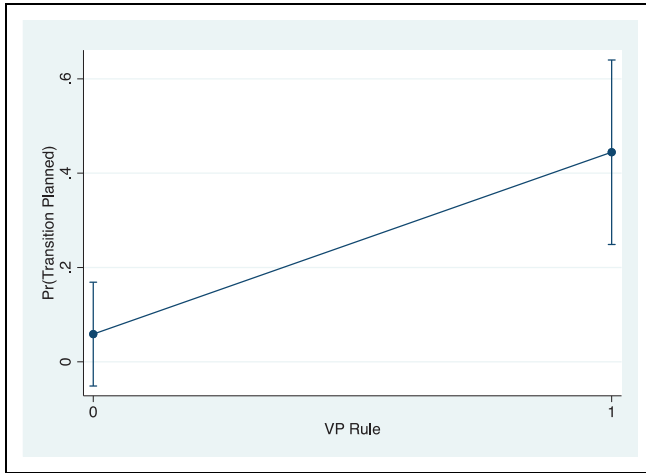
\* $p < 0.10$ .

\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

meaning the incoming leader should indeed be the constitutionally designated successor. The dependent variable for this set of regressions is *Transition planned*, which takes a value of 1 if the leadership transition was peaceful *and* the incoming leader was the designated successor. Since the sample for this set of regressions is restricted to regimes with constitutional succession rules, the main independent variable is the VP rule and the residual category is the Other rule.

Table 4 presents results of the logit analysis. The VP rule significantly increases the probability that the leadership transition will go according to plan, and this effect remains robust to the inclusion of the full set of controls. Figure 5 presents a graph of the size of the effect. While regimes with the Other rule only have a 6 percent chance of a peaceful and planned leadership transition, regimes with the VP rule have a 44 percent chance of a peaceful and planned leadership transition.



**Figure 5.** Probability that the transition will go according to plan.

This empirical pattern remains consistent when we subset the data even further to focus only on cases where the leadership transition was peaceful. There are 27 observations in which a regime had a constitutional succession rule *and* a peaceful leadership transition. Out of this subsample, the VP rule has a 70 percent success rate at bringing the designated successor to power, compared with the Other rule which has only a 25 percent success rate at bringing the designated successor to power. Although a limited number of observations precludes regression analysis, a difference-of-means test reveals that the rates at which designated successors come to power under the VP rule versus the Other rule are significantly different ( $p$ -value = 0.095).

Finally, a quick note on the outliers. There are a small number of cases in which the leadership transition was peaceful, but the new leader was not the designated successor. How the incoming leader manage to take office peacefully, despite not being the designated successor? Although there are only a few instances where this occurred, two general patterns emerge. First, these were usually occasions where someone other than the designated successor had a much better and stronger claim. In Gabon and Togo the outgoing leader's son took power as the new leader, despite not being the constitutional successor during their fathers' rule. In Angola, Gabon, and Mozambique, the Minister of Defense succeeded the outgoing incumbent, rather than the designated successor. The defense minister wields considerable power: they have control over the appointment, management, and mobilization of all security forces in the regime. Furthermore, in Angola and Mozambique, the Minister of Defense were often war heroes from the liberation struggle. Second, these cases are instances where the regime had some other institutional mechanism to resolve succession conflict peacefully, such as uniquely strong ruling parties in Mozambique

and Tanzania. However, these observations remain outliers, and the predominant way in which peaceful leadership transitions occur is when the designated successor takes power.

## Conclusion

This article examined the conditions under which peaceful leadership successions can occur in autocracies. I argued that constitutional rules play a critical role in regulating leadership transitions by solving dual problems of peaceful incumbent exit and peaceful successor entry. Constitutional succession rules—particularly those that appoint a designated successor—allow incumbents to exit power peacefully by reducing external coup threats. Ensuring that the incoming leader successfully takes power is a much taller order, and constitutional rules are especially effective when they appoint the vice president as the designated successor. The vice president's access to material resources deters other factions from challenging the succession procedure, enabling peaceful exit and entry, whereas designating successors without a power base is ineffective.

I show evidence of my theory using original data on constitutional rules and the appointment of designated successors in 46 African countries from 1960 to 2010. While all constitutional succession rules prevent incumbents from being deposed, I find that only the VP rule significantly increased the probability of a peaceful leadership transition. I show further evidence that this is due to the fact that designated successors under the VP rule are significantly more likely to ascend to the presidency. By contrast, when elites challenge the line of succession, conflict over the leadership transition is likely to emerge, even if the outgoing leader died peacefully.

These findings provide an important corrective to existing perceptions of African politics. As a region, Africa constitutes a “hard case” for theories of constitutional rules. Scholars have historically argued that authoritarian regimes in Africa were dominated by “big men” and weak institutions (Decalo 1976; Jackson and Rosberg 1982). More recent work examining constitutional constraints and the introduction of multiparty elections in Africa have taken institutions more seriously (Dionne and Dulani 2012; Posner and Young 2007). However, these studies remain skeptical of the effectiveness of constitutional rules in prior decades, before the end of the Cold War. By contrast, I show that constitutions in African dictatorships are not uniformly weak and leadership transitions have not always been violent or unregulated. Importantly, these are not simply post-Cold War trends. Constitutions matter, and this is true *even during the most authoritarian decades in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

Although the theoretical arguments presented in this paper generalize beyond regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa, future studies can collect data on constitutional rules and the appointment of designated successors from other regions of the world. Although the literature on authoritarian regimes has focused extensively on the

actions of leaders, there have been surprisingly few studies on the executive branch—particularly presidential cabinets. Similarly, studies of authoritarian institutions have only recently begun studying the effects of constitutions on autocratic stability. By further examining the content of autocratic constitutions, scholars can continue to understand the conditions under which institutions shape regime outcomes in dictatorships.

### Author's Note

Previous versions of this article were presented at the APSA Annual Meeting, MPSA Annual Meeting, and the Higher School of Economics. Data replication files are available in Harvard Dataverse.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. Eighty-four percent of autocracies from 1946 to 2010 had a ruling party (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010), and 57 percent of these parties failed to outlive the founding leader (Meng 2019).
2. I use the terms “authoritarian regime” and “dictatorship” synonymously. I also use the terms “dictator,” “authoritarian leader,” and “president” interchangeably.
3. Online Appendix Table 1 includes a full list of all constitutional succession rules for the transitions in my sample, and Online Appendix Table 2 lists the distribution of designated successors.
4. The reader may wonder whether leaders can also avoid the crown prince problem by appointing a “loyal ally” such as a family member or co-ethnic. However, existing research shows, in short, that dictators have no loyal allies. Family members overthrow

incumbents all the time (Kokkonen and Sundell 2014), and African leaders are frequently deposed in coups by their co-ethnics (Roessler 2011).

5. This particular strategy became more common after the 1990s, likely because the position was *too* weak (or sometimes non-existent) during the Cold War.
6. In order to determine whether the leadership transition went according to plan, a plan must exist in the first place—I therefore restrict my attention to regimes with constitutional succession rules.
7. I drop country-years that are coded as democracy for at least a ten-year period by Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010).
8. Following existing conventions, I require that the outgoing leader be in office for at least 3 years to be included in the dataset (Geddes 1999).
9. “Irregular” exits include: popular protest, removed by military, removed by other government actors, removed by rebels, and removed through threat of foreign force.
10. Data on constitutional succession rules was coded using constitutions in the Comparative Constitutions Project repository (Elkins, Ginsburg, and Melton 2010). Data on the designated successors was coded using the Europa World Year Book (Europa Publications 1960-2010).
11. In fact, consistent with my theory, the designated successor is generally deposed with the incumbent (which is why successors are incentivized to protect the existing regime).
12. The results remain consistent when using a linear probability model, rather than a logistic regression model (Online Appendix Table 6).

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