

Tutelary Power and Autocratic Legitimacy: Experimental Evidence from Kazakhstan’s Diarchy*

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First draft: September 9, 2021

This draft: December 26, 2022

Abstract

In autocracies, the phase of power transition is crucial for regime stability. As a means of mitigating risks of political instability, autocracies often allow tutelary power in which a regime guardian helps new leaders establish stable public support. This paper explores whether autocratic guardianship really contributes to boosting popular support by conducting survey experiments in Kazakhstan, where Kassym-Jomart Tokayev recently assumed the presidential position from the long-serving autocrat, Nursultan Nazarbayev. To elicit truthful responses, our survey relies on the item count technique and endorsement experiments. Our findings indicate that the successor Tokayev is more popular than the guardian Nazarbayev and that Nazarbayev’s involvement in decision making does not significantly increase public support for policies. Our analysis suggests that, contrary to the proclaimed benefits of guardianship, tutelary power may not contribute to improving regime stability.

*This study is funded by a JSPS grant-in-aid (17H04779) and approved by **the Institutional Research Board of Graduate School of Information Sciences at Tohoku University (2020-63[1-5])**. It is deemed not regulated by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (HUM00205334). It is also pre-registered with the Center for Open Society (OSF; Registration DOI **10.17605/OSF.IO/G9CD8**), time-stamped on **March 11, 2021**.

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Tutelar Powers and Power Transitions

For authoritarian leaders, outset of their tenures is the moment when they are most likely to slip out of power. At the beginning of their reign, many autocrats have not yet consolidated their power grabs. Unable to create credible power-sharing within their regimes, autocrats face imminent threats from internal elites (Albertus and Menaldo, 2012; Svolik, 2012). To minimize those threats, authoritarian regimes resort to various measures. Institutionalized parties and legislatures enable autocrats to establish credible power-sharing between the dictator and ruling elites (e.g., Magaloni, 2008; Wright, 2008; Svolik, 2012; Blaydes and Chaney, 2013). Winning big at elections, dictators demonstrate their strengths (Simpser, 2013; Higashijima, 2022). Autocracies may also adopt formal and informal rules for regular leadership change like hereditary succession (Tullock, 1987; Brownlee, 2007; Kokkonen and Sundell, 2014), succession rules and term limits on constitutions (Meng, 2020), and the appointment of “second-in-command” positions such as prime ministers and vice-presidents (Meng, 2021). Each of these institutions clarify in advance who will succeed political leadership after sitting incumbents, which reduces political uncertainty inherent in the phase of power transitions.

This paper focuses on an understudied, but not infrequent means of reducing uncertainty under power transitions in autocracies: *diarchy*. In this paper, diarchy is defined as a form of government characterized by *joint rule with both new and former leaders*. In autocracies, diarchy emerges when the authoritarian predecessor serves as the guardian or tutelary power for a new leader who succeeds the position of *de jure* supreme authority. In history, examples of joint rule are abound: co-rule by two figures were practiced in ancient Sparta, the Roman Republic, medieval Hungary, and cloistered rule in medieval Japan. In modern autocracies, we have observed a few tutelary powers including Russia’s “tandemocracy” by Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, Iran’s “theocracy” by the president and the supreme leader, tutelary regimes backed up by the military (e.g., Myanmar and Pakistan) and monarchic authorities (Nepal and Thailand), as well as China’s guardianship by the former president of the Communist Party. Do such tutelary powers contribute to stabilizing autocratic rule?

Autocracies face benefits and costs of guardianship. On one hand, the new leader may be able to rely on the former leader’s experience under diarchies. On the other hand, the former leader may be no longer a legitimate figure. The lack of institutional legitimacy may induce citizens’ negative assessment on the new regime. Given this trade-off, our preregistered hypothesis suggests that when deciding policies, the joint decision-making of the former and current dictators may be more likely to increase citizens’ support for the regimes, compared to diarchies where either only the former dictator or the current dictator is involved in

making policy decisions.¹

To empirically assess the effects of diarchy on public support, we conduct survey experiments in Kazakhstan. The country recently experienced a power transition from the long-serving autocrat Nursultan Nazarbayev to a new president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2019 but the latter had retained political influence as tutelary power until January 2022, when massive protests accused the regime of rampant political corruption under the three-decade rule of Nazarbayev and forced him to lose power as the guardian. To elicit truthful public support for these autocratic leaders, we employ indirect questioning techniques. In particular, we first use the item count technique (list experiment) to measure general support for each leader to estimate the popularity of the two figures. Then, to examine the effect of diarchical policy-making on public support, we conduct endorsement experiments. Intriguingly, our list experiment finds that Tokayev is more popular than Nazarbayev, which rejects the view on beneficial effects of guardianship and concurs with the recent political development in the country where citizens protested by accusing the Nazarbayev regime of corruption. Furthermore, Nazarbayev's tutelary power does not contribute to boosting popular support. The overall results indicate that diarchy may not be an effective method of garnering public support, especially when the guardian dictator has been long-serving prior to the new leadership and thus the old leader is regarded as a tutelary power with a short time horizon.

This paper makes two important contributions. First, this paper is the first scholarly attempt to investigate the causal effect of tutelary power on autocratic legitimacy among citizens. By viewing diarchy as an autocracy's solution to deal with risks in early stages of rule, we suggest that diarchy may not be as useful as other power succession tools like parties and heredity (Brownlee, 2007; Magaloni, 2008; Svoboda, 2012; Kokkonen and Sundell, 2014). Second, this paper also contributes to an important literature that seeks to accurately measure public opinion in the context of authoritarian rule (Kuran, 1991; Jiang and Yang, 2016; Shen and Truex, 2020). Specifically, this study uses indirect questioning techniques that attempt to elicit truthful popular support for autocratic leaders. Although a couple of important existing studies have used list experiments to measure public support for autocrats (e.g., Frye et al., 2017), little research has been done thus far by jointly using the item response technique and endorsement experiments.² Our results suggest that list and endorsement experiments may be better at measuring different aspects of autocratic rule. These methods may need to be used distinctively according to what aspects of popular

¹Our preregistration is available at https://osf.io/g9cd8?view_only=c97848fcb50d4c578dad44a9ddf524cc

²Blair, Imai, and Lyall (2014) is an important exception yet their main focus is on public support for a rebel group rather than the incumbent autocrat.

support for political leaders researchers wish to observe in autocracies.

Diarchy and Public Support in Autocracies

High public support helps autocrats hold onto power (Dimitrov, 2009; Guriev and Treisman, 2020; Higashijima, 2022). Internal rebellion is more threatening than external threats at the outset of autocratic rule (Svolik, 2012). Low popularity conveys a credible signal that the new autocrat is weak and incompetent, increasing the risk of internal rebellion (Casper and Tyson, 2014). Importantly, it is not an easy task for new leaders to derive political loyalty from citizens. As a means to guard against this risk, the former autocrats may be designated as tutelary powers which can help the new autocrats survive through those difficult times. Specifically, the former autocrats often advise the new leadership and are involved in policy-making processes within the government as the guardian. Tutelary power is expected to work as a formal (when the precedents occupy a formal position within the government) or informal (when the precedents retain *de facto* power without a formal position) institution that helps the new autocrat maintain public support for the regime and hence reduces the threats of other ruling elites.

Tutelary power has both advantages and disadvantages to derive popular support. On the bright side, guardianship may provide the new leaders with invaluable political experience and hence reduces political uncertainty. The guardians are likely to have rich experience as the precedent supreme authority. On the dark side, excessive involvement of the former autocrats may also undermine regime popularity. On the constitution, the current *de jure* supreme authority is the new autocrat. By casting the successor as a puppet, tutelary power signals that the regime will not engage in reforming problems that have been inherent under the old leadership.

Put differently, while window-dressing guardianship is not useful in holding up the new leadership, the predecessor's excessive political involvement is likely to damage the new leader's legitimacy. Given these benefits and costs of guardianship, authoritarian diarchy needs to take the balance between these two extremes. We suggest that the optimal form of diarchy may exist somewhere in the middle of these two scenarios: When deciding a particular policy, the joint decision-making of the former and current dictators on an equal basis is most likely to increase citizens' support for autocratic regimes under new leadership.

H1: In diarchical autocracies, the joint policy making process of the new and old leaders is more likely to enhance popular support, compared to those involving either only the former or current dictator.

The above discussion assumes a mechanism through which the participation of the former autocrat in policy making leads to enhanced public support: As the former dictator is widely perceived as competent in policy making and thus remains popular among citizens, joint rule helps the new autocrat recover public support for the new regime. Therefore, if hypothesis 1 holds, then it is likely that public support for the former autocrat should be higher than the current autocrat:

H2: To make the joint-decision making effective in enhancing public support for the regime, The former dictator is more popular than the current dictator.

Empirical Results

To examine public attitudes toward diarchical rule, we conducted a survey that includes two experimental components in Kazakhstan from January to March 2021. To elicit truthful responses to the sensitive questions about support for authoritarian leaders, we employed the item count technique (a.k.a. list experiment, see Glynn, 2013; Blair and Imai, 2012) and endorsement experiment (Bullock, Imai, and Shapiro, 2011). Supplementary Information (SI) A describes the sampling, design, and statistical analysis of our survey in detail.

The results of our analysis are summarized as follows. First, Tokayev has greater overall support than Nazarbayev. While our estimates using the list experiment suggest that both of them are supported by more than 40% of the Kazakh voters, the estimated support level for Tokayev is higher. Second, Nazarbayev’s involvement in policymaking processes does not improve perceived legitimacy or support for government policies. Our posterior analysis on the endorsement experiment data indicates that neither latent support for Nazarbayev’s active role nor support for joint effort by Tokayev and Nazarbayev is greater than support for Tokayev’s sole decision. Overall, our results cast doubt on the benefit of adopting diarchical power arrangements in authoritarian contexts.

Overall Support Estimated by the List Experiment

Figure 1 presents the difference-in-means estimates for the rate of support for Tokayev and Nazarbayev based on the list experiment data. The point estimates shown as circles are the average difference of the list experiment response between the non-sensitive list group and each of the sensitive list groups. Because each sensitive list includes one additional item, either Nazarbayev or Tokayev, the interpretation of this difference-in-means estimator is straightforward—it simply estimates the population proportion of those who support either of the dictators.

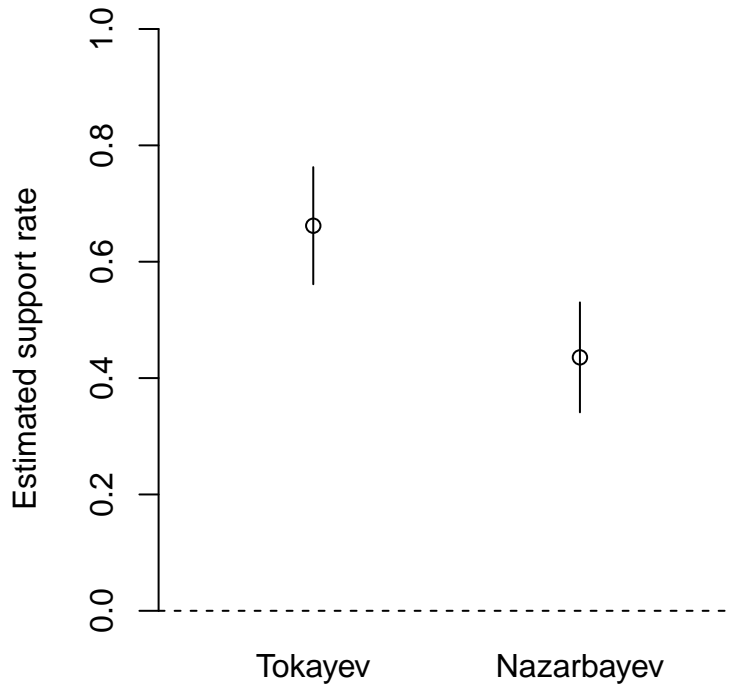


Figure 1: Difference-in-means Estimates of Public Support for Tokayev and Nazarbayev in the List Experiment. The vertical bars are the 95% confidence intervals. The dashed line at the bottom represents zero public support.

Our analysis indicates that both Tokayev and Nazarbayev received some public support when the survey was conducted. Tokayev’s support rate is estimated to be 66.2% whereas the point estimate of Nazarbayev’s support rate is 43.6%, and those estimates are statistically distinguishable from zero. The dashed line at the bottom of Figure 1 indicates zero support. The 95% confidence intervals do not cover this dashed line, meaning that the difference-in-means estimates are statistically significant.

A surprising finding from our list experiment is that Tokayev enjoyed greater public support than Nazarbayev. Our estimate of the difference between Tokayev’s support rate and that of Nazarbayev is 22.6% and its 95% confidence interval is [11.4, 33.9]. Thus, the estimated support rate of Tokayev is higher than that of Nazarbayev, and the difference is statistically significant at the 5% level. The results do not support Hypothesis 2, the important premise for the effectiveness of joint-decision making – the guardian should be more popular than the new leader.³

³All results presented in this section are based on the survey data as collected. However, we realized that the survey firm showed the respondents the wrong choice options after receiving our data. The respondents were not shown the answer option “0”. That is, they were not allowed to express that none of the list items applied to them. We conducted two types of sensitivity analysis to address this implementation failure, and

Endorsement Experiment Results

As SI A.3 describes, our endorsement experiment examines whether the involvement of Tokayev, Nazarbayev, or both in policymaking increases public support for policies. We used policies regarding healthcare, education, green energy, anti-corruption, foreign aid, and artificial intelligence. For English translation of the survey items, see SI C. Also, SI D presents the distribution of responses to each question for each endorser. Throughout our analysis, we use Tokayev’s endorsement as the baseline and investigate whether an endorsement of Nazarbayev alone or Nazarbayev in addition to Tokayev has positive support relative to Tokayev alone. That is, we analyze if the involvement of a tutelary dictator increases the popularity of the regime’s actions.

Figure 2 plots estimated latent support for Nazarbayev’s sole involvement (left) and joint involvement of Nazarbayev and Tokayev (right) relative to Tokayev’s decision. The quantity of interest is shown in Equation (6) in SI A.3.1. The posterior distribution is approximated by the Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) draws implemented via **R** package `endorse` (Shiraito and Imai, 2018).⁴ The point estimates are the posterior medians and the vertical bars are the 95% credible intervals.

Consistent with our results for Hypothesis 2, it is evident that neither single or joint intervention into policymaking by Nazarbayev is no more popular than Tokayev making decisions by himself. The horizontal dashed line indicates that the probability of support for Nazarbayev’s engagement into a policy being higher than Tokayev is 0.5. In other words, estimates should be above the line if the endorser’s involvement is more popular than Tokayev, while it should be below the line if Tokayev gets greater support. Both estimates—support for Nazarbayev only and support for Tokayev and Nazarbayev as a team—are very close to the 0.5 horizontal line, meaning that neither scenario is more popular than the one where

the results are shown in SI G. Figure G.1 is the same figure as Figure 1, except that all respondents in the Tokayev and Nazarbayev list groups who answered “1” are assumed to answer “0” in their true intentions. This assumption is the hardest test for our results because it creates the greatest decrease in the average response in the sensitive list groups, given the assumption that the observed response “1” includes the true “1”s and “0”s. The figure shows that while Nazarbayev’s estimated support is not statistically distinguishable from zero, Tokayev’s support is estimated to be positive and statistically significant. The second sensitivity analysis is shown by Figure G.2, which shows a contour plot of the p -values for the difference between support for Tokayev and support for Nazarbayev under all possible cases of the number of respondents whose true answer was “0.” The figure shows that the difference between the two support rates becomes statistically insignificant only when more than 100 respondents in the Tokayev list group and fewer than 200 respondents in the Nazarbayev list group would have chosen “0” if the option had been given. That is, the number of those who would have selected the erraneously hidden option needs to be negatively correlated across the list groups. Since we randomly assign a list to the respondents, we do not expect that these two numbers are largely different. Therefore, we conclude that our empirical results hold even with the failure of the survey implementations.

⁴Convergence diagnostics are shown in SI I.

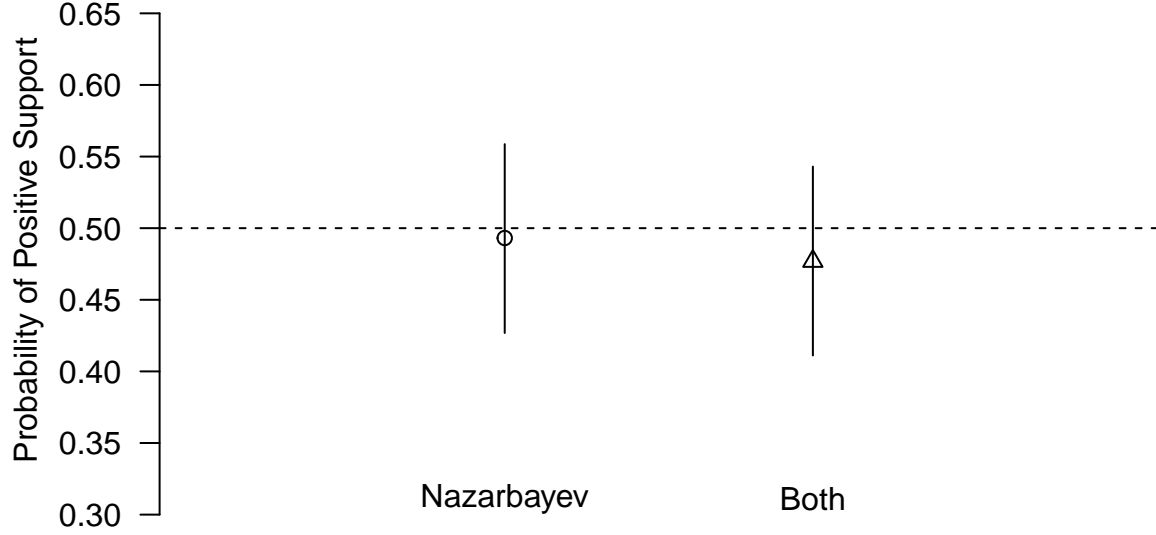


Figure 2: Posterior Median and the 95% Credible Intervals of the Probability that Support for the Endorser is Greater than Support for Tokayev. The dashed line at 0.5 indicates that an endorsement neither increases nor decreases support for policies.

only Tokayev is primed as a driver of a policy. In sum, Hypothesis 1 is not supported by the results of the endorsement experiment. That said, the results are consistent with those for Hypothesis 2 and the entire findings are not necessarily contradictory with our theoretical expectations: We assumed that diarchy might become a useful method to derive popular support as long as the guardian themselves is seen as popular. Given that guardians are no longer perceived as popular like the case of Kazakhstan, joint decision-making with both the former and new autocrats is not likely to be effective in cementing autocratic legitimacy.

Our hierarchical model described in SI A.3.1 allows us to explore some covariates' predictive relationships with estimated support. Figure 3 presents the probability of positive support for the endorser predicted by Tokayev's vote share in the previous presidential election⁵. Again, we analyze the effects of Nazarbayev's sole endorsement and a joint endorsement by Nazarbayev and Tokayev on public support for policies, compared to Tokayev's endorsement. The 2019 presidential election was held to succeed formal presidential power to Tokayev, presuming that Nazarbayev would continue to retain significant political influence as the chairperson of the Security Council. With this context in mind, if Tokayev's vote share in the previous presidential election in June 2019 is an indicator of popular support for the diarchical regime, Nazarbayev's endorsement, either jointly or individually, is expected to increase public support.

⁵The data is taken from the website of the central election commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan (<https://www.election.gov.kz/eng/>).

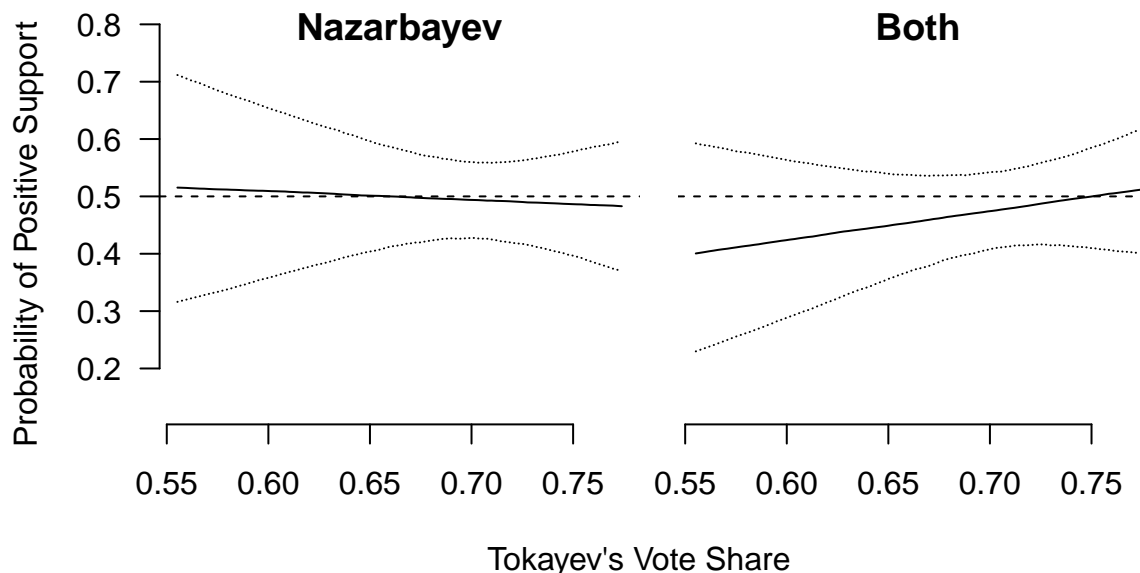


Figure 3: Posterior Medians and the 95% Credible Intervals of the Probability that Support for the Endorser is Greater than Tokayev, Predicted by Observed Values of Tokayev's Vote Share in the Previous Presidential Election. The dashed line at 0.5 indicates that an endorsement neither increases nor decreases support for policies.

The evidence we find is mixed at best. The left panel of Figure 3 shows the results for Nazarbayev's single endorsement. The fact that the plotted line is almost flat indicates that Tokayev's vote share does not predict an increase or decrease of public support. Whether Tokayev's winning margin was small or large, Nazarbayev's endorsement effect relative to Tokayev is estimated to be close to zero. The right panel for the joint endorsement of Nazarbayev and Tokayev, on the other hand, presents results that are a little more nuanced. A lower vote share is associated with a negative effect of the joint endorsement, although the probability of positive support for the joint endorsement is not statistically distinguishable from 0.5, meaning that we do not find enough evidence to rule out the possibility that policies endorsed only by Tokayev and policies endorsed by both Nazarbayev and Tokayev enjoy the same level of public support.

In sum, our empirical analysis does not corroborate theoretical expectations on tutelary power arrangements discussed in the section "Diarchy and Public Support in Autocracies." Under Kazakhstan's diarchy in 2021, the tutor Nazarbayev was less, not more, popular than the *de jure* leader Tokayev as a political leader. Moreover, we find no strong evidence that Nazarbayev's involvement in policymaking processes increased public support for resulting policies compared to Tokayev's sole initiative. In other words, the guardianship of the previous dictator did not benefit the regime in terms of gaining popular support. To make diarchy work, the guardian needs to be perceived as popular in the first place.

Concluding Remarks

Peaceful power transition is a challenge to authoritarian leaders. Tutelary power assumed by a retiring dictator, or diarchy, is often observed in authoritarian countries in an attempt to transfer power peacefully. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the pros and cons of diarchical power arrangements. We used two indirect questioning techniques—the item count technique and the endorsement experiment—to measure citizens’ attitudes toward the tutelary power of Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan. Addressing social desirability bias, our paper is the first to examine empirically how citizens under an authoritarian rule react to a retiring dictator maintaining de facto power over a de jure political leader. We found no evidence that such power helps the successor gain general public support or trust in specific policies.

In retrospect, our findings might have presaged what happened after the survey. In January 2022, ten months after our survey was conducted, Nazarbayev was ousted from his de facto power due to a large civil unrest. Tokayev, on the other hand, remained in power by both suppressing mass protests with military assistance from Russia and making concessions including the removal of Nazarbayev. Although the immediate cause of the unrest was a gas price increase, what divided Tokayev and Nazarbayev might have been the difference in popularity that we found in our analysis.

Unfortunately, our analysis leaves open the most important question about tutelary power rather than solving it: why tutelary power? Two prominent contemporary examples of diarchical power arrangements, Nazarbayev–Tokayev in Kazakhstan and Putin–Medvedev in Russia, seem to have failed. We showed that the former did not help the regime cultivate public support or trust, and it resulted in mass protests against the regime. The latter, toward which it is too late to investigate public attitudes, did not lead to a power transition and went back to the predecessor’s dictatorial rule. Our findings suggest that tutelary power in authoritarian regimes is unlikely to facilitate the regime’s perceived legitimacy. If diarchical power arrangements do not promote peaceful power transitions, they may be established to simply serve the retiring dictator’s interest. This should be one of the research agendas for future studies of power transitions in authoritarian regimes.

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