**Uwe Backes** 

# **Autocracies**

Introduction



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Introduction



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## I. Introduction

Every year, the Washington-based nongovernmental organization Freedom House publishes a World Map of Freedom, which ranks all the countries in the world according to the degree to which freedom rights apply (Fig. 1). Its simplifying three-way division of countries into zones of "free", "partly free", and "unfree" states facilitates an overview and vividly illustrates the enormous area of those countries in which people face barely controlled state power and in which active civil rights (such as freedom of expression, association, and assembly) are subject to major restrictions. Political scientists usually define these states as "autocracies" or (often synonymously) "dictatorships".



Figure I.1: Free, unfree, partially free countries, 2020, Source: Own representation. Data adapted from Freedom House, Map of Freedom 2021, at: https://fre edomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2021 (Jan. 26, 2022). Explanation: white: free, dark gray: unfree, light gray: partially free countries.

According to the Freedom House annual reports, 36 percent of the world's population lived in "unfree" states at the beginning of 2020 (population figures according to: World Bank 2022), led by the People's Republic of China with around 1.4 billion inhabitants, followed by Russia (approx. 144 million), Egypt (about 102 million), the Democratic Republic of Congo (about 89 million), Ethiopia (about 114 million), Vietnam (about 97 million), Iran (about 83 million), Turkey (about 84 million), and numerous less populous countries. "Partially free" states accounted for about a quarter of the world's population, with Indonesia (about 273 million inhabitants) ranked first, followed by Pakistan (about 220 million), Nigeria (about 206 million), Bangladesh (about 164 million), Mexico

#### I. Introduction

(about 128 million), the Philippines (about 109 million), Thailand (about 69 million), and other smaller countries.

Since Freedom House (Reports 2003, 2015, 2021) has published regular reports since the early 1970 s, rough patterns of progression can be discerned. For example, the share of the world's population living in "unfree" states (47.3% in 1972) declined primarily because of the demise of the Soviet Union and its satellites in the early 1990 s (31.1% in 1992) but rose again in the following two decades. For the same reason, the share of the world's population living in "partly free states" reached a particularly high level in 1992 (44.1%) and decreased again in the following decades. In 2002, the proportion of the world's population living in "free" states reached a peak, only to decline somewhat thereafter. At the beginning of 2020, only slightly fewer people lived in "unfree" and "partly free" countries (total: 61%) than in 1972 (total: 64.9%).

Francis Fukuyama's (1992) prophecy of the "end of history" as a consequence of a worldwide triumph of the model of free-market democracies needs to be placed under a big question mark in view of the data from Freedom House (and many other findings). In parts of the world, the "China model" (Bell 2015) of autocratic modernization (with undeniable successes in poverty reduction, for example) has gained traction instead. In the U.S. and large parts of Europe, forms of populism with partly extremist features have gained ground, also because of temporarily worsening crisis-ridden developments (euro financial crisis, "refugee crisis", coronavirus pandemic). The question "How Democracies Die" (Levitsky/ Ziblatt 2018) influenced the international community of democracy researchers, who developed pessimistic scenarios relating to the slide of the world's most influential democratic constitutional state into authoritarian forms during Donald Trump's presidency. The old theme of democracy safeguards had already experienced a renaissance in the years before. Old emergency safeguards (such as "militant democracy") were rediscovered and discussed again (see only Capoccia 2005, Downs 2012, Kirshner 2014, Thiel 2009).

Against this background, autocracy research has experienced a new upswing. Its subject is as old as mankind and already at the center of the earliest political science studies we know. This textbook aims to link the approaches of the classics with the methods and results of recent and latest autocracy research. It is aimed primarily at students of political science who are looking for a historically embedded introduction to the conditions under which contemporary non-democratic regimes emerge, function, and develop. It follows its own research grid but strives to integrate the perspectives and findings of different schools. It aims to encourage an interdisciplinary view and to integrate approaches and findings from neighboring disciplines (especially history, law, and sociology, but also economics, communication studies, and psychology).

The global view forces us to concentrate on the results of comparative studies with medium and high case numbers. To reduce the unavoidable level of abstraction, generalizing statements are combined with individual case findings wherever possible in order that overly strong consideration of the dictatorships in Germany can be avoided.

The structure of the book follows a typology, which chapter IV – after introductory sections on the concepts, methods and data of autocracy research and a brief historical outline on the theory of forms of the state – unfolds based on the legitimation of rule, combined with a discussion of the fundamental analytical categories. As a result, separate chapters are devoted to "despotism", "absolutism", "authoritarianism" and "ideocracy". The following two chapters, which deal with conditions of systemic stability and forms of systemic transformation, contain considerations across types. Democratization is focused on less than the transition to autocracy and the change between different types of autocracy. The presentation concludes with a discussion of the causes of the recent "autocratization wave", which is at the center of the international research debate.

This book emerged from my lecture "Autocracies in Comparison" at the Institute of Political Science at the Dresden University of Technology. It owes valuable stimuli to the methodical and methodological expertise of Werner J. Patzelt's comparative systems research of many years, but also, to no small extent, to the critical queries of my students. The same applies to the student assistants who have supported me over many years – often far beyond what could have been expected.

The focus of the lecture changed over the years. To begin with, it focused on totalitarianism research and constructive critical engagement with it. Above all, I owe much to the many years of trusting and friendly cooperation and intellectual exchange with Eckhard Jesse (first: Backes/Jesse 1984). Later, transformation research was added - with new perspectives and insights made possible by a Marie Curie project (with Tytus Jaskułowski and Abel Polese as intellectually stimulating cooperation partners) funded by the European Commission and initiated by Gerhard Besier (Backes/Jaskułowski/Polese 2009). The Hannah Arendt Institute, with its historical research focus on dictatorships in Germany, encouraged interdisciplinary exchange and counteracted the fixation on the present that is often found in political science. At the same time, it broadened the view of the entire spectrum of forms of modern autocracies worldwide. Steffen Kailitz made accessible the results of international autocracy research like no one else at the Institute. The studies of Juan J. Linz, with whom we were able to exchange ideas during an extended stay in Germany in the early 2000s, remained groundbreaking. This sharpened our awareness of the special position of ideological dictatorships, which had lost importance worldwide with Samuel Huntington's third wave of democratization but had by no means disappeared completely from the scene. From this insight sprang - in collaboration with Peter Bernholz, Wolfgang Bialas, Lothar Fritze, Johannes Gerschewski, Christian Göbel, Udo Grashoff, Roger Griffin, Hermann Lübbe, Leonid Luks, Jerzy Maćków, Lorenzo Santoro, Manfred G. Schmidt, Peter Thiery, Jiwon Yoon – a volume that sought to elaborate the special features of ideocratic autocracies in comparison with other forms (Backes/Kailitz 2016). Chapter VIII (Ideocracy) builds on this. Some insights from a comparison of forms of "state socialism" have also been incorporated into that chapter (Back-

#### I. Introduction

es/Heydemann/Vollnhals 2019). Peter Graf Kielmansegg's studies on the theory of legitimacy and the structure of rule (see only the contributions in Cavuldak 2019) provided important impetus in this respect.

The basic typology of this book draws primarily from the profound studies of Juan J. Linz, but at the same time takes up ideas that were drafted in the context of several conceptual historical studies at the Hannah Arendt Institute (most recently: Backes/Heydemann 2018). Mike Schmeitzner was a frequent, always inspiring interlocutor in this process. Later, Thomas Lindenberger joined with new social and everyday historical questions. A historical preliminary appeared in a conceptual historical volume under the aegis of Alexander Gallus and Eckhard Jesse (Backes 2004). A first typological draft was presented for discussion at the conference organized by the "Comparative Political Science" section of the German Political Science Association (DVPW) in Delmenhorst (November 2007). In particular, Gero Erdmann, who died much too early, as well as Marianne Kneuer gave me valuable advice. The linkage of the typological concept with the question of autocratic legitimizing strategies (Backes 2013) and the politics of history (2009 a) was obvious.

Thus, this book has a long history and many spiritual mothers and fathers. The errors and mistakes contained in it are, of course, the sole responsibility of the author.

## IV. Analytical categories and typology

#### Summary:

The results of a doctrine of forms of government conducted since antiquity serve as a basis and systematization of elementary categories for the analysis of forms of rule. The specifics of the legitimation of rule form the key to a key for a systematic differentiation of autocracy types. The typological differentiation into despotism, absolutism, authoritarianism, and ideocracy determines the structure and argumentation of the following chapters. Conceptualizations and terminologies based on the structure of rule are included.

## 1. Analytical categories

The history of the theory of state forms, which was traversed in giant steps in the last chapter, provides a variety of analytical categories through which to fathom the variable structural forms of autocratic rule and to understand the statics and functioning of its supporting elements. Aristotle's typology of six, which has been most effective over the centuries and has been applied in ever new configurations, connects two spheres that are closely interwoven: the structure (the construction or architecture) of rule on the one hand, and the mind (the ideas, motives, values, orientation patterns, convictions, and goals) of the rulers on the other. All typologies up to the present refer to one of these spheres and/or link them together. No typology can or wants to cover all spheres equally. However, typologies on different levels can be combined, and the categories of analysis that are effective in them can be used to unravel complex structures of effects and make them understandable.

The intellectual sphere of domination can be described by the generic term *legitimation of rule* (see with different systematization: Brunner 1979; Merkel 2010: 22). It comprises *legitimization of rule* (of the rulers) and *legitimacy of rule* (of the ruled). Legitimization of rule means the narratives, discourses, arguments, procedures, means, and methods that rulers use to justify their exclusive position of power and their actions. Their *claim to power*, expressed in public pronouncements, is frequently incorporated into constitutional documents and shapes more or less elaborate state doctrines in which the *goals of rule* are defined. They determine the central content of state propaganda (in the state media) and indoctrination (especially in the programs of official youth organizations as well as curricula and textbooks).

Legitimacy of rule means the recognition of rule in the eyes of those subject to it. According to Max Weber, this belief in legitimacy can be based on traditional, rational and procedural, or charismatic sources (Weber 2005, pp. 726–742). This refers to the mentalities, ideas, procedures, and personal qualities that determine the success of the legitimization efforts of the rulers. The general population's assessment of the authority's worthiness of recognition essentially determines its willingness to behave in a compliant manner that conforms to the rules and the system and even to support the system actively and loyally (Easton 1965: 289–

#### IV. Analytical categories and typology

310), and thus represents one of the most important determinants of political stability (see Chapter IX). Legitimation of rule thus encompasses the complex interrelationships between legitimization efforts from above and expectations, claims, and convictions for legitimation from below. It generates the binding force without which the halls of power would inevitably collapse at the first major storm.

*Table IV.7: Category scheme for analyzing autocratic rule, source: own representation.* 

Legitimation of rule	Structure of rule
Legitimization of rule	Access to power
Claim to power	Rulers
Goals of rule	Exercise of rule
Propaganda, indoctrination	Range of rule
Legitimacy of rule	Intensity of rule
<ul> <li>Legitimacy belief</li> </ul>	
Loyalty	

The legitimation of power provides the mortar, as it were, that ensures the stability of the power structure. However, the statics of the *structures of rule* are determined by other factors as well. Of central importance is the arrangement of formal and informal institutions of autocratic rule: How is *access to power* regulated, i.e., how do people gain access to key positions of power? What procedures ensure the (re)appointment (co-optation in the narrower sense; Loewenstein 1973) of vacant top positions? What qualities determine the recruitment for office? Which *ruling bodies* (such as patronage networks, interest groups, parties, the military, militias, security services) have a determining influence on the way in which power is exercised?

The *exercise of rule* is essentially shaped by the type of access to power and the people who hold it. Its success, in turn, depends on the extent to which it succeeds in integrating population groups whose lack of loyalty to the system (disloyalty/ semi-loyalty) could pose a threat to the existence of the political system. The better social integration succeeds, the less the autocratic elite will be inclined to use repressive means (creation of fear and terror, threat of violence, use of force, incarceration, imprisonment, political murder). However, the functional logic of autocracies also follows their goals of rule. The more ambitious these goals are, the greater the effort will be to win over as much of society as possible. The claim to power and the goals of power thus explain the different scope and intensity of power to a large extent. The *range of rule* refers to the radius of state intervention and regulation, i.e., the range of social subsystems covered (the economy, religion, culture, sports, leisure). *Intensity of rule*, on the other hand, refers to the density of regulatory intervention by the rulers in certain segments of society. In this

context, the structure of the public sphere, especially the communicative relations between rulers and the ruled (Finer 2003), and the degree of social, economic, and cultural autonomy are of great importance.

## 2. Typology

With the help of the categories of rule described above, a variety of typologies can be formed, which divide an immense wealth of forms into manageable units. Typologies are instruments in the process of cognition. They emphasize certain characteristics while others fade into the background. They are intellectual constructions whose value is measured above all by their ability to facilitate the solution of complex research questions.

This book is based on the distinction between autocracies and constitutional states. It follows Karl Loewenstein, one of the pioneers of modern autocracy research, whose "kratological" (from the Greek kratein, meaning to rule) constitutional theory is based on it. In line with Montesquieu (though differing terminologically), autocracies are considered regimes in which a single person or assembly, committee, military junta, or party exercises power without effective control. "The political monopoly of the sole holder of power is not subject to constitutional limitations; his power is absolute" (Loewenstein 2000: 28). Autocracies as systems of concentrated exercising of power are contrasted with constitutional states based "on the principle of power sharing". "Power sharing occurs when several independent power holders or state organs are involved in exercising political power and in the formation of the will of the state. The functions assigned to them are subject to reciprocal control by the other holders of power" (Loewenstein 2000: 27). The central idea of the constitutional state is to secure freedom through power control. It determines its functional logic. Constitutional decision-making processes require the cooperation of various power holders with distributed competencies. Autocracies, on the other hand, follow the logic of concentrated power, which enables the ruling elite to make and enforce its decisions with sovereignty. As a result, the political decision-making process takes place in small circles, usually in secret. The political participation of the vast majority of the population in the formation of wills and decision-making is severely limited. Where elections take place, their outcome does not endanger the position of the power elite. And where parliaments do exist, they have little power to exercise control - just as courts do not pass judgments that run counter to the vital power interests of the ruling elite.

Loewenstein's approach of distinguishing between autocracy and constitutionalism has been unjustly forgotten in modern autocracy research, because it is far removed from the institutional analysis of older jurisprudential state theory. The institutional arrangement is analyzed in close connection with the political processes, especially the "inter-organ controls of the electorate vis-à-vis government and parliament", the degree of autonomy of local and regional bodies, the arrangement of individual liberties, and the resulting "power dynamics" of group pluralism (Loewenstein 2000: 266–316).

#### IV. Analytical categories and typology

The process-oriented distinction between "democracy" and "autocracy" (or "dictatorship", as it is usually called in historiographical discussions; Schmiechen-Ackermann 2002; Hürter/Wentker 2019) in the tradition of Schumpeter (Schumpeter 1987; in line with this, for instance: Acemoglu/Robinson 2006: 17) and Robert A. Dahl (1971: 3) corresponds to Loewenstein's approach in many respects, for the control of power serves political pluralism and presupposes it. The control of power and pluralism establish the "forum type", the development of which Samuel Finer (2003 a: 43) traced from antiquity to the 20th century. Political procedural criteria, such as Adam Przeworski's "contested elections", i.e., elections whose outcome is uncertain and which therefore entail the risk of (partial) loss of power for the rulers, are compatible with Loewenstein's definition of constitutional government. The statement that democracies are systems in which parties lose elections (Przeworski 1991: 10; see also Przeworski/Alvarez/ Cheibub/Limongi 2000: 14), however, draws too narrow a line because it also applies to constitutional regimes whose electoral law supports fair competition but does not meet the requirements of democratic elections (the historical minimum condition is usually universal male suffrage; Kailitz 2017 a: 33). The history of British constitutionalism and suffrage in the 18th and 19th centuries illustrates this. The emphasis on the electoral process in defining democracy often leads to neglect of the institutional arrangement. Competitive elections, however, can produce parliaments with weak checks and balances. Most importantly, however, the criterion of democratic elections causes the historical precursors of modern constitutional government to fall into the autocracy zone. If, however, the political system of Great Britain at the beginning of the 19th century (before the democratization of suffrage) falls into the autocracy zone because of its still strongly aristocratic character, historical genealogies become blurred, knowledge of which seems indispensable for the interpretation and appropriate classification of modern constitutional democracies.

Thus, the distinction here is not between democratic and non-democratic systems, but between constitutional government and autocracies. The central criterion for this differentiation is the way in which power is exercised. If the political system has a center of power with at best weak institutional controls, it is an autocracy. Lack of control over power and limited (or even absent) pluralism are two sides of the same coin since the guiding principle of the control of power is to safeguard freedom and plurality. The supremacy of the executive is countered by controlling bodies and independent courts. Opposition is legal and legitimate and is institutionalized in particular in parliaments that emerge from competitive elections. This corresponds to a pluralistic public sphere with an independent media in which criticism of the government can be articulated with impunity.

Table IV.8: Criteria for distinguishing between constitutional governments and
autocracies, source: own representation.

Constitutional Government	Autocracy
Effective control of power	Concentration of power
<ul> <li>Parliament with extensive control power</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Absence of parliament or weak con- trol</li> </ul>
Independent courts	<ul> <li>Courts are subject to instructions from the executive</li> </ul>
Pluralism	Lack of/strongly limited pluralism
Competitive elections	<ul> <li>Elections with lacking or weak competitivity</li> </ul>
Party pluralism	<ul> <li>Lack of or severely limited party pluralism</li> </ul>
Institutionalized opposition	Lack of or weak opposition
<ul> <li>Plural, critical public sphere</li> </ul>	Public dominated by the executive

Autocracies, on the other hand, follow the logic of concentrated power. Beyond this central commonality, however, they exhibit major differences. Differences in the way autocracies act can be better understood if they are classified not according to their structures of rule, but according to their underlying guiding ideas and motivational driving forces. The main types of autocracy can be identified according to the respective legitimization of rule, i.e., according to the self-image of the rulers, the intellectual sources from which they draw, and the ideas, attitudes, and value systems with which they justify their rule. It must be borne in mind that it is not uncommon for facade ideologies to be developed that carefully cloud the actual interests of rule with a dense haze of incense. Such "window dressing" is not always easy to see through. This is one of the main problems in distinguishing between different types of legitimating autocracy.

However, it does not seem insurmountable in view of the difficulties that arise from the primary distinction between types of autocracy according to rule accession/the rulers. The typologies of Geddes (1999) and Hadenius/Teorell (2007), for example, which have been widely used in recent autocracy research, level out the serious differences between ideocratic-totalitarian and authoritarian autocracies (which by no means fundamentally calls their usefulness into question). In contrast, the older dichotomy between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, which can be found in many political science textbooks and was developed by Juan J. Linz (2000) (albeit supplemented and modified several times), with its complex linking of categories of rule (ideology, pluralism, participation), is not conclusively derived from basic categories of rule analysis (Merkel 2010: 42; Jesse 2021). The following proposal takes up this criticism and develops Linz's approach in a modifying way.

## VI. Absolutism

#### Summary:

Dynastic legitimacy distinguishes constitutionally unrestricted (absolute) monarchies from other forms of autocracy. In some regions of the world, monarchical absolutism defies the expectations of modernization theorists, who assign it little future potential. The unexpected longevity of "family rule" calls for explanations that take into account the complex interplay of legitimatization and structural factors.

## 1. Historical-terminological classification

"Absolutism" as a term for an unrestricted monarchy goes back historically to a decision by the Roman Senate in 24 BC, which declared Augustus *princeps legibus solutus* and thus released him from observing those rights and legal norms that appeared incompatible with the exercise of the public functions of an emperor (Turchetti 2001: 165). But it was not until the reign of Diocletian (Roman emperor from 284–305 AD) that the principate, under the influence of the Hellenic Orient, de facto transformed into a kind of absolute monarchy with dynastic features. The supreme power ("summa potestas") was constitutionally transferred to the still existing Senate upon the princep's death. In practice, however, the emperor ("caesar") usually appointed a family member as heir and endowed him with the "tribunicia potestas" so that his succession could not be disputed. In this way, a path to unrestricted dynastic monarchy was taken, which was to shape the history of Europe for many centuries.

It was not until the 19th century that "absolutism" became the name for a type of state that was "based on the enforcement of the monarchical will over the entire territory of the state with the help of a bureaucracy dependent on the king, a standing army, taxes levied by the king" (Weis 1985: 37), and a high justice concentrated with the king. In reality, in the so-called absolute monarchies there were intermediate powers ("corps intermédiaires") everywhere with varying degrees of influence (Loewenstein 2000: 58 f.; Loewenstein 1952; Asch/Duchhardt 1996), so that the theorists of absolutism assumed a "monarchie limitée" - in contrast to despotism, as it prevailed in the Ottoman Empire, for example. The reality of rule in continental Europe was characterized by the more or less strong repression of these intermediate powers, a process that began as early as the High Middle Ages (the rule of the Staufer Frederick II in Sicily, emperor of the Roman-German Empire from 1220 until his death in 1250, is a striking example of this) and reached a peak as an instrument of pacification in the age of the religious wars. Absolutism in the fully developed sense can be spoken of in Spain as early as during the reign of Philip II (1556-1598), in France beginning with Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, and in Germany from the end of the Thirty Years' War onward, where it was not able to establish itself in the empire with its prevailing counterforces, but in many of the territorial states (as opposed to the "free imperial cities").

#### VI. Absolutism

In the second half of the 18th century, the so-called enlightened absolutism spread under Frederick II in Prussia (1740–1786), Joseph II in Austria (1765–1790), Charles III in Spain (1759–1788), the Marquês de Pombal in Portugal (1756– 1777), in Bavaria under Max III Joseph (1745–1777), or in Tuscany under Peter Leopold (1765–1790), characterized by the functionalization and rationalization of kingship. The monarch no longer referred primarily to the divine nature of his power, but to his duties as an organ of state promoting the common good. The enlightened rulers strengthened the rights of the peasants, many of whom were still dependent on fiefdoms, and pursued the juridification of social relations through a judiciary that was gaining in independence. This laid important foundations for the later constitutionalization of absolute monarchies.

Constitutional historians usually determine the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy in the 19th century based on two factors: the degree of independence of the judiciary and the controlling power of the representative bodies. Wherever influential parliamentary control bodies were lacking, but the dynastically legitimized monarch ruled within the framework of fundamental laws ("leges fundamentales"), one speaks of absolutism. However, as soon as the monarch "was dependent on the approval of parliament not only for the passing of taxes, but also for legislation and the budget, and legislative power was thus exercised jointly by monarch and parliament" (Kirsch 1999: 52), the threshold to a constitutional state was crossed. However, this definition lacks the judiciary, whose power of control is apparently presupposed. Where it shows weaknesses, a constitutional–historical transition zone should be noted.

Regarding the legislature, monarchies are absolute (and autocratic) when the monarchical executive can set and apply norms without depending on the participation of another constitutional body with its own powers. In Europe, many monarchies were constitutionalized as early as the 19th century - mostly in a non-linear process marked by setbacks. The "constitutional monarchy", which was also propagated by liberals in the first half of the 19th century, endowed the monarch with an "absolute veto against laws of parliament" (Beyme 1973: 30). Authors speak of "waves of republicanization" (Friske 2008; Wolf 2016); although the power of monarchs diminished, they often retained their representative-symbolic significance (as in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden). The only absolute monarchies in a strict sense that remained at the threshold of the 20th century were those of the Russian tsar and the Ottoman sultan, whose geographical borders extended far beyond Europe. The Manchu dynasty in China, according to its population the "largest monarchy in the world" (Thieme 2017: 22), was unable to cope with the internal and external challenges of the giant empire and fell victim to a military coup in 1911/12. The First World War is regarded as the trigger of the second "republicanization wave".

But as early as 1910, the Portuguese King Manuel II had to flee into exile. More consequential was the downfall of monarchically ruled empires in or shortly after World War I: In Russia, the tsar fell in 1917; the Ottoman sultan was dethroned a few years later. The (partially) constitutionalized monarchies of Germany, Aus-

tria-Hungary, and Italy transitioned from monarchies to republics. In the Balkans, the remaining monarchies were transformed into royalist dictatorships (supported by the military and effectively suspending existing constitutions), such as Serbia from 1929, Bulgaria from 1935, Romania from 1938. In Greece, too, the end of the monarchy was followed only by a brief republican interlude. The delegitimization of the monarchy prepared the ground for a military-backed autocracy (from 1936).

In some regions of the world outside Europe, largely absolute monarchies have maintained their importance until the present day or experienced some form of revitalization. In many cases, these are products of decolonization, which was not infrequently accompanied by the restoration of patrimonial and patriarchal structures. Absolute monarchies established themselves particularly successfully in the Islamic cultural sphere, where they were often able to anchor themselves on a religious and traditional basis. Samuel Huntington's (1968: 191) prediction grounded in modernization theory that the emergence of new middle classes in oil-rich states would sooner or later bring down the monarchies materialized neither in the years after the first oil crisis (1973) nor in the course of the "Arabellion" (2010–2012). Apparently, they owe their enduring power to factors that remain underexposed in the modernization-theoretical perspective. Surprisingly, Michael Herb's (1999) compilation of overthrown and surviving monarchies in the Near and Middle East (table 11) was still valid more than a decade later.

Surviving monarchies	Overthrown monarchies with year of overthrow
Bahrain	Egypt 1952
Jordan	Iraq 1958
Kuwait	Libya 1969
Morocco	Afghanistan 1973
Oman	Iran 1979
Qatar	
Saudi Arabia	
United Arab Emirates	

Table VI.11: Surviving and overthrown monarchies in the Near and Middle East, source: Herb 1999: 17.

Absolute monarchies differ from other forms of autocracy in their dynastic legitimacy, but not in the indefiniteness of their term of office (Thieme 2017: 36 f.). However, in academic literature subtypes of "autocratic monarchies" try to account for different degrees of "absoluteness" or formal institutionalization. Tom Thieme distinguishes between "representative" and "limited" monarchies as typical subcases of "autocratic monarchies". The representative monarchical

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systems (Cambodia and Malaysia), however, are monarchies only in terms of their form of government (i.e., constitutionally) because the monarchs have no influence on the political decision-making process apart from their representative ceremonial functions. By form of government, they are authoritarian autocracies with hegemonic party systems and parliaments and judiciaries with weak checks and balances (Croissant 2016: 157–200, 241–290). Of greater importance is the distinction between absolute and semi-absolute (in Thieme: "autocratic-limited") monarchies. The autocratic limitation arises from the understanding of office and consists primarily in the fact that the monarch in such political systems exercises power jointly "with a government controlled by him" and "as a rule does not interfere" (Thieme 2017: 49) in its affairs. For 2016, Thieme recorded Bhutan, Kuwait, Morocco, Thailand, and Tonga as "autocratic-limited" and Bahrain, Brunei, Jordan, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Swaziland (as of 2018 "Kingdom of Eswatini"), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as unrestricted "absolute monarchies".

To better understand the survivability of these regimes, it is necessary to examine their special features in terms of legitimation and structure of rule in comparison to constitutional states on the one hand and other forms of autocracy on the other.

#### 2. Legitimation of rule

Dynastic succession is the central distinguishing criterion of (absolute) monarchy. The justified reference to elective kingship (as in the Roman-German Empire or the UAE) does not contradict this, because the election is conducted by an elite body (in the UAE the seven emirs, in the Roman-German Empire the prince-electors), and only those who meet strict succession requirements are eligible for election.

At the same time, dynastic succession is a central source of legitimacy, the drying up of which calls the existence of the monarchy into question. It is associated with *founding myths*, "complexity-reducing stories" (Bernsen 2017: 889) that proclaim the dynasty's chosenness, exquisite origins, outstanding abilities, historical achievements, and heroic deeds. The further back the historical roots reach, the brighter the image of a dynasty shines which, at least in appearance, has withstood all the storms of time. This is also and especially true of those monarchies that were restored after long periods of foreign rule. They symbolize the restoration of an original, authentic, and just order and project elementary socio-psychological needs for collective identity onto a person who connects the living with the generations of the deceased – a feat of legitimacy that is difficult for other types of autocracy to achieve.

The religious motifs of monarchical legitimation of rule have a long tradition. For centuries, the *divine right* was a central source of legitimacy for European monarchies. The court theologian of Louis XIV, the bishop, sought-after pulpit orator, and crown prince's educator Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704) defined the state as a Christian community whose basic laws rested on immovable biblical

foundations. The hereditary monarchy was the original order: God was the first king; from him the role was passed on to the forefather Adam, and from it grew paternal authority (Bossuet 1967: 18). This religious legitimization of rule lost importance in the age of Enlightenment and "secularization" but remained effective in parts of the population. The same was true for the idea that the king was a "father of the country" who ruled benevolently over his country children (Loewenstein 1952: 74–76).

Particularly in the Islamic cultural sphere, where the population is strongly influenced by religion, such ideas remain a central source of legitimacy for monarchical systems today. In 2016, of 23 autocracies with state religions, 13 were monarchies, including all the monarchies in Islamic countries (Thieme 2017: 121). All of them pursued an active religious policy including the promotion of the state religion and, in some cases, hostile repression of competing views. In the founding myths of monarchies, national identity concepts are often linked to religious motifs. The monarch symbolizes the unity of the nation; he is the "guarantor of the existence and continuity of the state", as Article 42 of the constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco states.

Above all, he is "Amir al-Muminin", leader of the faithful, who can claim to be of Sharif descent (descendants of the Prophet): The Alawid dynasty, from which King Muhammad VI is descended, traces its family tree – as does the Jordanian royal house, which similarly has an "aura of Islamic credibility" (Schlumberger/Bank 2002: 52) – all the way back to the Prophet. In Morocco, the dynasty has ruled since the 17th century. Under it, the country was able to regain its independence: Sultan Mohammed V was at the head of the Istiqlal movement that freed Morocco from colonial rule in 1956. The king thus symbolizes the political as well as the religious unity of the country.

King Hassan II (who ruled from 1961 to 1999) was also able to defend this unity against internal enemies by surviving two military coups and resisting the strengthening republican, secular, and technocratic movements with successful countermobilization. This strengthened his legitimacy in the eyes of broad segments of the population, especially since he gradually shifted toward a less repressive mode of rule that relied more on co-optation toward the end of his reign (Naguib 2020: 409).

However, Morocco's national identity construction does not combine with a missionary and fundamentalist claim. In this respect, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia forms an antithesis, especially since it does not have a Sharifian lineage. Its founding in 1932 was preceded by several centuries of struggle for autonomy and national unity. According to the key narrative of legitimacy, it began in 1744 with the legendary alliance between Muhammad bin Saud and Imam Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, which linked political and religious goals, unifying the Arabian Peninsula by restoring the "right faith" (Ministry of Culture and Information 2021). The defense of Islam in its authentic shape forms the core of the political and religious ruling ideology. It is linked to many practical tasks, such as controlling education, observing prayer times, prohibiting alcohol consumption,

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in a controlled manner – in the hope of restabilizing rule in this way (Przeworski 1990: 191 f.). Liberation is usually the result of conflicts within the winning coalition, because of which "softliners" move to the top.

Some of the transformation processes that are particularly relevant to autocracy research are explained in more detail in the following sections, with the help of examples. Without claiming to be exhaustive, they deal with processes of transformation, some of which have been well researched and some of which have received little attention.

## 2. Forms of Transformation

#### 2.1 De-democratization

Consolidated constitutional states can collapse in a short time due to external influence: Hitler's "Blitzkrieg" in the West replaced France's III Republic, which had emerged in the 1870 s, with Marshal Pétain's authoritarian regime. Collapses of democracy because of internal shifts in power, on the other hand, are usually the result of developments that drag on over longer periods of time. For the "slow death" of democracy, the concept of *defective democracy* offers a model for analysis. The term can be misunderstood because there is no such thing as a "perfect democracy" and every consolidated constitutional state has deficiencies that become apparent when constitutional claims and reality are compared. Furthermore, "defective democracy" logically presupposes a "functioning democracy". Most importantly though, the concept captures the violation of minimal standards, the undercutting of which leads to gray areas that range between consolidated democracies and autocracies in historical-political reality.

This concept is useful for analyzing processes of de-democratization. Four forms of defective democracy are systematized (Merkel et al. 2003): In exclusive democracy, there is inequality of participatory rights. As the historical predecessors of today's democracies show, this does not necessarily impair the effectiveness of checks and balances. The older, aristocratic/monarchical constitutional states, however, could only maintain their stability if they were able to satisfy the growing participation needs of emerging population groups, especially by relaxing restrictions on voting rights. The crisis of Italy's parliamentary monarchy after World War I was also a consequence of the "trasformismo" practiced for a long time, i.e., political "tricking" of and keeping out new population groups (especially workers and the Catholic rural population) eager for participation in favor of the ruling interests of the liberal bourgeoisie (Sturzo 1926; Backes 2017). As is well known, states that were far advanced in constitutionalism, such as Great Britain, were democratized late on, if we take as a yardstick, for example, the introduction of universal male suffrage, which comparatists often see as a historical threshold to democracy (Dahl 1971: 3; Powell 1982: 3; Coppedge/Alvarez/Maldonado 2008). In the present day, "exclusive democracy" mostly means the impairment of electoral equality, as was criticized even in long-established democracies such as the United States during the 2020 presidential campaign in connection with a "gerrymandering" practice that identified black voters as Democrat supporters (Freedom House 2021).

*Illiberal democracy* covers violations of civil liberties, in particular due to an insufficiently independent judiciary. The problems associated with illiberal democracy are older than the history of modern democracy and are closely linked to the development of constitutional states. Recently, they have been at the center of the European Commission's infringement proceedings against Poland and Hungary for, among other things, jeopardizing the independence of the judiciary, freedom of association, and freedom of the press (Kovács/Scheppele 2018).

*Enclave democracy* refers to the emergence of "states within the state" that are beyond the reach of legitimate institutions. The term is often applied to Latin American countries in which the conditions of "electoral democracy" (Huntington 1991: 7) apply, i.e., free and fair elections function reasonably well, but the military (or other actors with their own means of power, such as guerrillas and organized criminals) is insufficiently controlled and acts as a "reserve power" in the event of political crises (Muno/Thiery 2002).

*Delegative democracy* concerns the loss of the balance of powers through the creation of "super-executives". This usually happens through the election of populist and charismatic presidents (such as Donald Trump in the U.S. or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil), who go to great lengths to enforce their decision-making power against the judiciary and parliaments, accept bending of the law, and permanently damage rule of law if their mobilization capabilities are not throttled by effective countervailing forces (such as parliaments, courts, critical media).

Autocratization is particularly demanding in political systems that have reached a high level of democratic constitutionalism. Marianne Kneuer (2021) has proposed a stage model for such cases, which takes up elements of Karl Dietrich Bracher's "Stages of the Seizure of Power" (Bracher/Sauer/Schulz 1974) and links them with insights from recent autocracy research. The example of Venezuela, on the basis of which she "sequences" the process of the erosion of democracy and establishment of autocracy, lends itself well in this respect because no other country after 1945 has undergone the full journey from consolidated democracy to authoritarian autocracy (Coppedge 2017). Kneuer's model is based on an actor-oriented approach. Autocracy is conceived as the result of the actions of agents of erosion, who are intent on changing the rules of the political game (intention), purposefully appropriate means of power to do so (agency), and successfully mobilize supporters. This requires political opportunity structures that enable access to power and its successful defense over a longer period. As in the Weimar case (see Bracher 1955 for a classic description), the journey in Venezuela led through electoral successes that enabled the government to take power and made the subsequent process of concentration of power possible, which weakened the institutions of control and the opposition.

Stage models do not necessarily presuppose far-reaching planning of autocratisation. Actors' actions will always display a certain degree of improvisation. In pursuing their long-term goals, they exploit favorable constellations (especially

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weaknesses of their opponents). The example of Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan shows how cunning they can sometimes be. As in Venezuela, his access to power was achieved through electoral success. To remain in power in the face of declining approval ratings and a wave of protests (2013) that was suppressed only with difficulty, the inner circle of power pursued the goal of changing the conditions of competition in the party system in such a way that the formation of a strong opposition and its resurgence would be prevented. Attempts to install a presidential system "alla Turca" failed in 2015 due to a lack of the necessary majorities. But the military coup of July 2016 opened a window of opportunity for far-reaching constitutional amendments aimed at strengthening the presidential executive (Tokatlı 2020: 327-389). Professional observers now soon spoke of a "competitive authoritarian regime" (Esen/Gumuscu 2018: 350). At the actor level, this was prepared, among other things, by the co-optation of potential rivals to the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP): Thus, an influential Erdoğan critic, Süleyman Soylu, was introduced to the party that supported the regime and given ministerial dignities. As minister of the interior, he now had the task of keeping the protests on the streets small. Rivals who did not allow themselves to be co-opted were politically put out of action: Selahattin Demirtas, who had challenged much of the ruling party in the June 2015 elections with his Kurdish party (the election was repeated because of this), was remanded in custody a year after the new elections of November 2015 and only received a verdict years later for alleged misconduct dating far back. When Ekrem Imamoğlu ended the governing party's rule in the March 2019 municipal elections in Istanbul, Erdoğan forced a re-election, but it ended with an even higher result for the National Alliance candidate. Various attempts followed to take legal action on flimsy charges against the newly elected mayor (Mumay 2021). The case demonstrated both the (semi-)competitiveness of elections and the lack of independence of a lenient judiciary.

#### 2.2 Despotization

Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu explain Turkey's de-democratization and autocratization with a triangular dependency approach that combines political economy and coalition theory considerations. They speak of an "extensive accumulation of capital and allocation of resources to a cross-class coalition between an emerging economic elite" (Esen/Gumuscu 2020: 6) and urban lower classes, which was formed under the leadership of the AKP against a long-standing alliance of secular middle and upper classes. This has led to the emergence of corrupt clientelist networks, which the ruling party has linked to "crony businesses" (preferably in the energy and construction sectors) as well as to social groups at the bottom of the income scale that benefit from a wide range of social services. Through the selective and non-transparent awarding of public contracts with large financial volumes, the AKP government has tied companies loyal to the regime to itself, which in turn provided resources to support voters loyal to the AKP (for example, by issuing food vouchers and granting cash allowances). In return, recipients of state support provided the government with democratic legitimacy. The beneficiaries of the system on both sides (companies as well as

social benefit recipients) were united in their interest in maintaining the AKP's political hegemony.

Critics have given Turkish President Erdoğan the title of "sultan". The *sultanization* of Turkey occurred through a process of de-democratization similar to that described by Mark R. Thompson for the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos in the early 1970s. The "clientelist democracy" (Thompson 1998: 208) developed into despotism because Marcos purposefully used his steadily increasing access to resources to integrate institutions such as the military and the judiciary into his elite cartel and thus deprive them of their independence. Postcolonial liberation movements such as the precursors of the Tunisian RCD also followed this path. Under Ben Ali, the state party lost its ideological compass, while political patronage gained central importance (Jebnoun 2014: 110; Sassoon 2016: 48).

A more recent example was provided by Nicaragua, which, under Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista National Liberation Front FSLN (from 2006), moved closer in nature to the regime of the Somoza clan, which was overthrown by the Sandinistas in 1979. The former liberator gradually broke with all the ideals of the Sandinista Revolution and integrated sections of the elite (such as representatives of the Catholic clergy and private business potentates) into his "winning coalition", some of whom he had previously fought to the death. Thus, the leftist revolutionary populist transformed himself into a "neopatrimonial dictator in the older Latin American style" (Thaler 2017: 157). The despotization of Nicaragua was "lubricated" to a considerable extent with Venezuelan oil. Ortega's power circle secured immediate access to the proceeds of the Nicaraguan-Venezuelan state-owned conglomerate "Albanisa", which evolved from an oil-importing company into a family-owned corporation under the control of close confidants and the president's sons. Due to Ortega's heart disease, his politically influential wife Rosario Murillo, who served as the official government spokeswoman for a long time, gained more and more influence in the inner circle of power. At the same time, the FSLN lost importance as a regime party. Family members gained control over several media companies.

Linz/Stepan and, in their wake, Peter Gelius have systematically examined the *despotization of ideocratic* rule. Linz/Stepan (1996: 344) called Ceauşescu's Romania "post-totalitarianism cum sultanism". Totalitarianism weakened, while despotic features of rule emerged more strongly in Ceauşescu's regime: personalism (personality cult, family rule), increased personal arbitrariness, and the loss of importance of the Marxist-Leninist state ideology in favor of Ceauşecu's idiosyncratic opportunistic interpretations of the world. Peter Gelius put Romania, Castro's Cuba, and North Korea side by side. In doing so, he identified the main phases of their development from their totalitarian beginnings to them becoming variants of totalitarian (North Korea) or post-totalitarian sultanism (Romania and Cuba). For each phase, he strictly systematically worked out the characteristics of their political leadership, the extent of (limited) pluralism in the economy and society, the development of a state ideology, and the mobilization efforts of the ruling elite to capture their continuities and discontinuities. According to Gelius, the processes of sultanization were reflected above all in the extent of

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personalization of the ideology and the closest leadership circle. For Cuba, he noted a lesser degree of sultanization and explained this, among other things, with the modest lifestyle of the Castro brothers. Gelius saw the fact that the tendencies toward a personality cult on the Caribbean island lagged far behind North Korean and Romanian practice primarily as a consequence of the authentic charisma of Fidel Castro, whose legitimacy, moreover, had been based on the greater autonomy of the Cuban Revolution, while Kim Il-sung and Ceauşescu owed their rule to foreign powers, no matter how much they later sought to emphasize their independence (Gelius 2013: 409–412).

#### 2.3 De-totalitarianization and re-totalitarianization

In Gelius and Linz/Stepan, sultanization/despotization is part of the concept of de-totalitarianization, which is one of the best-researched transformations of autocratic regimes (Backes 2009). The gap between totalitarian claims and reality was already inherent in the polarity of type formation (Sartori 1999) and the subject of critical examination of concepts of totalitarianism from the 1960s onward (see, for example, Ludz 1974). In a strict sense, no historical regime fulfilled, for a longer period, all the requirements that Hannah Arendt (2005: 944–979), for example, based her demanding, ideology- and terror-focused, concept of totalitarianism on. Even Stalin's rule, for example during the war years, underwent a temporary/sectoral decline in repression and terror (Altrichter 2000: 109). After Stalin's death, partial de-totalitarianization set in, which was associated, among other things, with a more restrained and predictable control practice, the reduction of the camp system, and modest but still noticeable cultural re-pluralization. In late socialism, mass terror was completely absent, the former totalitarian dynamic with its chiliastic promises having solidified into bureaucratic procedures. The 1980s brought a renewed surge of de-totalitarianization, the intensity of which varied considerably from country to country. It started in Poland, where the Catholic Church held a significant position of power and where the visit of the Polish pope in June 1979 had spurred the self-confidence of the faithful population in the face of state power. It spread to the Soviet hegemon with Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in 1985, who attempted to reform the encrusted system under the slogans "perestroika" and "glasnost", thus unleashing a de-totalitarianization dynamic of change that would soon shake the basic autocratic structures of Russia and its satellite states.

The processes of de-totalitarianization largely brought about a rapprochement with more "ordinary" forms of autocracy, but nowhere did they progress so far that the traces of high totalitarianism disappeared completely. Long before the end of real socialism, researchers had tried to give the change appropriate conceptual expression. In 1970, Richard Löwenthal, an expert on Eastern Europe, was one of the first to speak of a change to "post-totalitarian" (Löwenthal 2009 a: 596) authoritarianism. In the international discussion, the term *post-totalitarianism* became common, which Juan J. Linz (2000: 252) systematically unfolded in the mid-1970 s. Totalitarian traits had by no means disappeared in the regimes described in this manner, but they had weakened in a significant way. Although

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