Economic Crisis and Authoritarian Breakdown: Reassessing the Conventional Wisdom in Light of Evidence from Africa

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Abstract

Although the conventional wisdom holds that economic crises should make the break down of authoritarian regimes more likely, just as such crises make the break down of democratic regimes and the defeat of incumbents in established democracies more likely, several authoritarian regimes, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa, have proven to be remarkably resilient throughout the economic crises of the 1990s. This paper is devoted to explaining the variation that the conventional wisdom fails to explain. After reviewing competing explanations used to explain why authoritarian regimes may survive economic crises, I argue that the role of government in the economy is a key variable. Where the government controls access to a great many employment opportunities, economic crises actually make the break down of authoritarian regimes less likely. Evidence from seventeen African countries supports the argument.

At the dawn of the 1990s, the prognosis for authoritarian regimes in Africa was not good. While no analyst expected entrenched autocrats to go quietly into the night, the break down of particular authoritarian regimes was thought to be more likely than in previous decades. This is largely because of (1) the continuation of economic crises and (2) the introduction or reintroduction of multiparty elections. Economic crises, defined as decreasing productivity, high unemployment and/or high inflation, appeared to make long-enduring autocrats more vulnerable to defeat in multiparty elections, *coup d'etats*, or, at the very least, more likely to concede constitutional reforms that would decrease their powers to rule arbitrarily (i.e., especially as concerns the security forces and the judiciary).

By the end of the 1990s, it was clear that several autocrats had outlived the prognosis assigned to them at the decade's dawn and, in spite of multiparty elections, continued to rule rather arbitrarily. Despite having presided over poor economic performance autocrats like Omar Bongo of Gabon, Cameroon's Paul Biya and Daniel arap Moi of Kenya, and their ruling parties, survived multiparty elections and appeared to rule more arbitrarily at the end of the 1990s than at the decade's dawn (see Joseph 1997; Toukogoung 1997; Gardinier 1997; Olukoshi 1998; Ndegwa 1998; Throup and Hornsby 1998). In sum, authoritarian regimes have proven remarkably resilient, despite conditions, especially economic conditions, which were thought to favor their demise or at least make possible deeper political change than has indeed taken place.

This paper is devoted to explaining why the prognosis made in the early 1990s proved so wrong; why particular authoritarian regimes survived, and even thrived, through periods of economic decline. This paper *is not* devoted to explaining democratization, but is limited to explaining the break down of authoritarian regimes[1] that may or may not be replaced by regimes that are more democratic.[2] Further, the purpose is not to identify every factor that prevents or promotes the break down of an authoritarian regime, but to identify factors that typically determine the effect that economic performance might have on the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown. The approach, therefore, is avowedly structuralist, but in no way is meant to deny that there are, as Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986) stress, many contingencies to transitions from authoritarian rule; a great deal of *fortuna* and *virtu*. However, the approach used in this paper assumes that identifying what we can explain by way of structures first will help us to identify what can only be explained by contingencies and other factors that are important but difficult to measure, such as political culture.

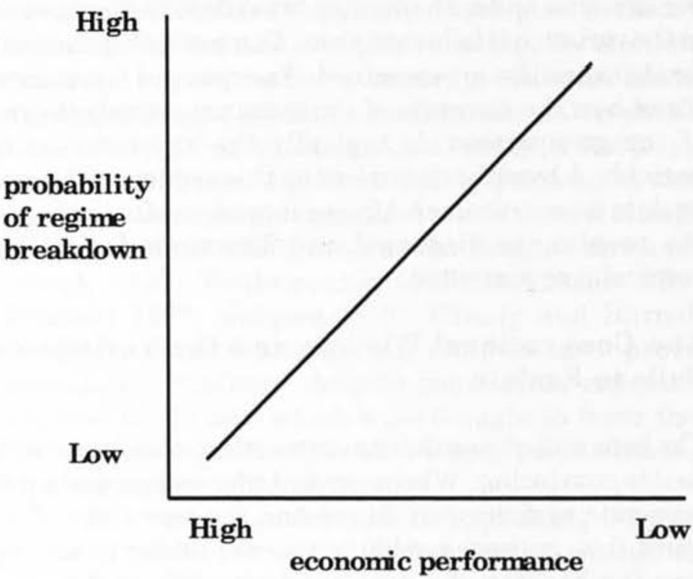
The paper begins with a review of the conventional wisdom about the relationship between economic performance and authoritarian breakdown with reference to the variation it fails to explain. Competing explanations for that variation are examined. An argument is presented about how the structure of the economy, namely the role of the government, is typically the key intervening variable. A hypothesis implied by this argument is tested on data from seventeen African countries. In conclusion, the results are discussed and directions for further research are presented.

The Conventional Wisdom and the Variation it Fails to Explain

The logic underlying the conventional wisdom is as simple as it is convincing. Whenever and wherever there is poor economic performance, rulers and the very rules of the game (i.e., regime) are likely to come under attack and lose the backing of key supporters. Where there are multiparty elections, citizens are more likely to vote incumbents out of office (see Diamond and Linz 1989). Where there are no multiparty elections and authoritarian rule, economic crisis makes the patronage networks or the "authoritarian bargain", upon which authoritarian regimes typically rest, more difficult to sustain. Under deteriorating economic conditions, politicians, whether trying to save their political skin or seize an opportunity to grow in power, are thought to be more likely to concede or initiate reform[3] (see Haggard and Kaufman 1995). Although the leaders in some types of authoritarian regimes may be more willing or capable of riding out economic crises than others (see Geddes 1999b), economic decline is thought to make authoritarian breakdown more likely.

FIGURE 1

Stylized Illustration of the Conventional Wisdom On the Relationship Between Regime Breakdown and Economic Crisis



Note: According to the conventional wisdom, as economic performance worsens the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown increases.

In sum, according to the conventional wisdom, economic crises should never make the break down of an authoritarian regime less likely. As depicted in Figure 1, the relationship between the break down of an authoritarian regime and economic crisis is thought to be linear and positive: as economic performance worsens, the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown increases. While the conventional wisdom is theoretically sound, there is a great deal of empirical evidence, particularly from Sub-Saharan Africa, that does not support it. As Table 1 shows, the relationship between authoritarian

TABLE 1

Authoritarian Breakdown and Economic Performance in Africa

	Authoritarian Breakdown 1990-2000	No Authoritarian Breakdown 1990-2000
Positive Economic Growth 1985-1995	Nigeria (1.2) Cape Verde (2.4) Chad (0.6) Guinea (1.4)	Ghana (1.4) Tanzania (1)
Negative Economic Growth 1985-1995	Benin (-.03) CAR (-2.4) Malawi (-0.7) Zambia (-0.8)	Burkina Faso (-0.2) Cameroon (-6.6) Gabon (-8.2) Kenya (-.01) Senegal (-0.1) Togo (-2.7) Zimbabwe (-0.6)

Note: Authoritarian breakdown is defined as the electoral defeat, overthrow or death of the incumbent ruler or party that reigned during the single-party era that was followed by constitutional change (see Nohlen 1999). Economic growth is measured as the average annual change in GNP per capita between 1985 and 1995 (World Bank 1997).

breakdown and economic crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s is neither as linear nor as positive as transition specialists lead us to expect. The conventional wisdom would lead us to expect most countries to fall in the upper right and lower left cells; authoritarian breakdown should be more common where authoritarian regimes presided over negative economic growth and less common where authoritarian regimes presided over positive economic growth.

Some countries do fall into the cells in Table 1 where, according to the conventional wisdom, we would expect to find them. For example, there is Ghana and Tanzania. In Ghana, where there was positive economic growth during the late 1980s and early 1990s, President Jerry Rawlings and the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) won elections and continued to control the state through the 1990s (see Giymah-Boadi 1999). In Tanzania, where there was also weak but positive economic performance during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the ruling party, the *Chama cha Mapunduzi* (CCM), won elections and continued its "cozy" relationship with the state (see Fengler 1999).

On the other hand, several countries fall into the lower right and upper left cells in Table 1, where, according to the conventional wisdom, we would not expect to find them. For example, in Cameroon, Kenya, and Gabon, rulers and ruling parties have won multiparty elections by increasing margins in spite of worsening economic performance. President Paul Biya's electoral victories in Cameroon, where economic performance has been especially miserable, are particularly striking (see Van de Walle 1994; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997). Although President Daniel arap Moi seemed to be on the verge of defeat several months prior to the 1992 election in Kenya, he won that election and, in spite of worsening economic performance, won a second election in 1997 by a slightly larger margin (see Hartmann 1999). Moi and the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) have reconsolidated their control over the state through the

1990s and continue to use the police and security personnel to intimidate voters and opposition figures (see Ndegwa 1998; Barkan and Ng'ethe 1999).

Competing Explanations for the Variation

The question is, then, what distinguishes countries where there has been economic crisis and no authoritarian breakdown, countries in the lower right cell of Table 1 such as Cameroon, Kenya, and Gabon, from countries where there has been both economic crisis and authoritarian breakdown, countries in the lower left cell such as Benin, the Central African Republic, Malawi and Zambia? What makes some autocrats and their ruling parties more capable of riding out economic crises than others? Plausible explanations include level of development, socio-economic inequality, foreign aid, ethnic heterogeneity and the type of authoritarian regime in place.

It has been argued that a low level of development or poverty is key in allowing authoritarian regimes to survive economic crises (see Lipset 1959: 1994) and it has been suggested that poor dictatorships are impervious to economic crises, while wealthy dictatorships are more vulnerable when incomes decline (see Przeworski 2000). It is no accident, according to this line of thought, that authoritarian breakdowns first occurred in the wealthiest countries of Western Europe and that the so-called "third wave" of democracy began in Southern Europe, which had experienced industrialization and achieved a certain level of economic development, before it hit Latin America and other regions that developed later. Where people are already very poor they have less to lose when there is economic decline. It is thought that they are both less affected by economic decline and/or lack the resources necessary to oust autocrats or reform their political system. Where people have achieved more wealth, they have both more to lose during economic crises and more resources to mount effective efforts to reform the status quo.

As Table 2 indicates, the explanation that focuses on level of development, measured as GNP per capita, does not appear to be adequate. Some of the countries where there has been authoritarian breakdown have been at least as poor as many of the countries that have not experienced authoritarian breakdown. Long-enduring autocrats and their ruling parties have survived economic crises in some of Africa's wealthiest countries, such as Cameroon, Congo(B) and Gabon, each with a GNP per capita that has consistently been at least twice the African average GNP per capita, and have been defeated by opposition parties in relatively poor countries, such as Malawi and Chad (see World Bank 2000b).

Table 2

Authoritarian Breakdown and Level of Development

Authoritarian Breakdown 1990-2000	GNP per capita 1995	No Authoritarian Breakdown 1990-2000	GNP per capita 1995
Benin	370	Ghana	390
Cape Verde	660	Tanzania	120
Malawi	170	Burkina Faso	230
Nigeria	460	Cameroon	650
CAR	340	Gabon	3490
Chad	180	Kenya	280
Guinea	550	Senegal	600
Zambia	400	Togo	310
		Zimbabwe	540
Average:	391.3	Average: (without Gabon)	390

Note: Countries where there was authoritarian breakdown are countries where the ruler who ruled during the single-party/no party era was defeated in a multiparty election, overthrown or, alternatively, the death of the ruler was followed by constitutional change (see Nohlen 1999). GNP per capita for 1995 is gathered from the World Development Report 1997 (World Bank 1997).

Alternatively, it has been suggested that income inequality is the key variable determining the effect of economic crisis on the probability that an authoritarian regime will break down (see Boix 2001; Luebbert 1991). Without getting too deeply into the underlying logic and contingencies concerning the arguments about the significance of income inequality, the crux of the arguments is that we can expect authoritarian breakdown to be more likely when and where income inequality is extremely low or extremely high. When income inequality is extremely high, the poor are thought to be more likely to revolt and, regardless of the response of the wealthy[4], where there is a revolt there is a greater chance of regime breakdown than when there is no revolt. When income inequality is low, the wealthy are, all else equal, less threatened by the redistributive impact of regime change and therefore, authoritarian breakdown, and in fact democratization, is more likely.

As Table 3 shows, it appears that inequality is not an adequate explanation for why some African authoritarian regimes were capable of riding out economic crises and others were not. Data is not available for all of the countries included in our sample, so further study may reveal another pattern. But, at this point, the average Gini index[5] in countries where long-enduring autocrats and their ruling parties were defeated or overthrown is in fact higher than the average Gini index for countries where long-enduring autocrats and their ruling parties were not defeated or overthrown. In fact, in some countries where autocrats or long-enduring ruling parties survived, such as Ghana and Tanzania, there was significantly more equality than in countries where autocrats were defeated, as in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Zambia. The argument that stresses inequality fails to sufficiently recognize, among other things, the possibility that where there is more equality citizens may be less motivated to mount opposition to the long-enduring autocrat or ruling party.

Table 3

Authoritarian Breakdown and Inequality

Authoritarian Breakdown 1990-2000	Gini Index 1990s	No Authoritarian Breakdown 1990-2000	Gini Index 1990s
CAR	61.3	Burkina Faso	48.2
Guinea	40.3	Ghana	32.7
Nigeria	50.6	Kenya	44.5
Zambia	49.8	Tanzania	38.2
		Senegal	41.3
		Zimbabwe	56.8
Average:	50.5	Average:	43.6

Note: Countries where there was authoritarian breakdown are countries where the ruler who ruled during the single-party/no party era was defeated in a multiparty election, overthrown or, alternatively, the death of the ruler was followed by constitutional change (see Nohlen 1999). Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income in a country deviates from a perfectly equal distribution (World Bank 2000a). An index of zero represents perfect equality while an index of 100 equals perfect inequality.

It has also been argued that foreign aid allows some autocrats and/or their ruling parties to ride out economic crises (see Clapham 1996; Lancaster 1999; Joseph 1999). It is assumed that authoritarian regimes typically rest on patronage networks or an "authoritarian bargain". Foreign aid may provide authoritarian regimes with resources to sustain the patronage networks through economic crises. Where aid is reduced, authoritarian regimes are likely to become more directly exposed to the effects of economic downturns and patronage networks become unsustainable. It is suggested that this is why authoritarian breakdown occurred more swiftly in Latin America and Eastern Europe, where regimes relied less on foreign assistance or where foreign sponsors, in particular the Soviet Union with respect to left-wing dictatorships and the United States with respect to right-wing dictatorships, were no longer capable or willing to sponsor autocrats and their ruling parties, than in Africa and the Middle East, where external patrons have been more reluctant to sever the aid tie because of economic and/or humanitarian reasons (see Haggard and Kaufman 1995).

Table 4

Authoritarian Breakdown and Foreign Aid

Authorit'n Breakdown 1990-2000	Avg. Annual Change in ODA 1990-98	No Authorit'n Breakdown 1990-2000	Avg. Annual Change in ODA 1990-98
Benin	-2.3	Burkina Faso	2.1
Cape Verde	0.4	Cameroon	-1.8
CAR	-8.4	Gabon	-7.9
Chad	-3.2	Ghana	-4.4
Guinea	-1.4	Kenya	-11.1
Malawi	-4.0	Senegal	-6.5
Nigeria	-7.5	Tanzania	-3.8
Zambia	5.3	Togo	-7.9
		Zimbabwe	0.4
Average:	-2.6	Average:	-4.4

Note: Countries where there was authoritarian breakdown are countries where the ruler who ruled during the single-party/no party era was defeated in a multiparty election or overthrown between 1990 and 2000 (see Nohlen 1999). Average annual change in net ODA is measured as average annual change in total official development assistance as a percent of GDP between 1990 and 1998 according to *African Development Indicators 2000* (World Bank 2000b).

An explanation that focuses exclusively on foreign aid does not appear to be adequate either. Table 4 shows that overseas development assistance (ODA) even declined more on average in African countries where autocrats and/or their ruling parties survived through the 1990s than in African countries where autocrats and their ruling parties were defeated or overthrown. Many of the countries where autocrats have proved most adept at surviving, as in Kenya, have had aid slashed dramatically as many of the political conditions attached to the disbursement of that aid have gone unmet. The aid argument assumes that an authoritarian regime can be effectively starved to death. However, this argument fails to recognize the possibility that autocrats are often able to foist the costs of aid cuts off on citizens for a very long time (see Simons 1996; Cordesman 1999). Under certain conditions, aid cuts, like other types of economic sanctions, might in fact weaken the very people they intend to strengthen and strengthen the very people they intend to weaken.

It has also been suggested that ethno-linguistic fractionalization explains the slow economic growth of African countries and that it might also explain why autocrats and ruling parties in some countries, particularly African countries, are able to ride out economic crises for longer periods of time than others (see Easterly and Levine 1997). It is thought that politicized ethnic cleavages divide the opposition and would-be reformers. Thus, we can expect where ethnic cleavages are less politicized or politically relevant, autocrats and their ruling parties, having presided over economic decline, are more likely to be defeated in multiparty elections or overthrown.

Table 5

Authoritarian Breakdown and Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalization

Authoritarian Breakdown 1990-2000	PREG Index	No Authoritarian Breakdown 1990-2000	PREG Index
Benin	.30	Cameroon	.73
CAR	.33	Ghana	.44
Malawi	.49	Kenya	.57
Nigeria	.37	Senegal	.14
Zambia	.71	Tanzania	.50
		Togo	.49
		Zimbabwe	.41
Average:	.44	Average:	.47

Note: Countries where there was authoritarian breakdown are countries where the ruler who ruled during the single-party/no party era was defeated in a multiparty election or overthrown between 1990 and 2000 (see Nohlen 1999). The PREG index, using the Hirschman-Herfindahl concentration formula, represents the probability that two randomly chosen individuals would be of different politically relevant ethno-linguistic groups. Politically relevant is determined by identifying evidence that members of an ethno-linguistic group acted collectively as an ethno-linguistic group in contesting for political power at the national level since independence (see Posner 1999).

Ethno-linguistic fractionalization does not appear to do a good job in explaining the variation. Table 5 provides an index of the politically relevant ethnic groups (PREG)[6] in eight African countries where there has been authoritarian breakdown and eight African countries where there has not been authoritarian breakdown (see Posner 1999). The PREG index is an estimation of the probability that two randomly chosen individuals would be of different politically relevant ethnic groups, where 100 represents the highest probability or the most politically relevant ethnic groups. It appears that the number of politically relevant ethnic groups does matter to some extent. The average PREG index for countries where autocrats and their ruling parties were defeated or overthrown is lower, but not significantly lower than the PREG index for countries where autocrats and/or their ruling parties survived economic crises. Also, there is variation that the conventional wisdom fails to explain. For example, in spite of a PREG index of .71, the opposition in Zambia unified and defeated the long-enduring autocrat and ruling party and, in spite of a PREG index as low as .14, the opposition in Senegal proved incapable of knocking off the long-enduring autocrat and ruling party. Ethnic heterogeneity may be important, but there is reason to think that it is not the most important factor in explaining the survival of authoritarian regimes and that the political salience of ethnic cleavages is determined by other factors.

It has also been argued that all authoritarian regimes are not alike and that certain authoritarian regimes, especially single-party regimes, are more likely to ride out economic crises than other types, namely military and personalist regimes (see Geddes 1999a; 1999b). Single-party regimes are expected to survive economic crises for longer periods of time than military or personalist regimes. This is because leaders in each type of regime typically face different incentives. Leaders of military regimes, being most interested in the unity of the military as an organization, will, rather than go down with a government and jeopardize the unity of the military, return to the barracks during economic crises that fomented during their control of government. Leaders in personalist regimes, with a smaller group of people that has an interest in the survival of the regime, will tend to hang on to power for as long as they can, since there are no barracks to return to, and tend to eventually end in violence. Leaders of single-party regimes, with a wider group that has an interest in the survival of the regime, tend to be more capable and willing to co-opt would-be reformers. If economic crises persist, all these regime types will break down, but, given similar circumstances, single-party regimes will typically outlast the others.

Table 6

Authoritarian Breakdown and Regime Type

Authorit'n Breakdown 1990-2000	Regime Type 1990	No Authorit'n Breakdown 1990-2000	Regime Type 1990
Benin	P	Burkina Faso	P
Cape Verde	P	Cameroon	P
CAR	P/M	Gabon	P/SP
Chad	P	Ghana	P
Guinea	P/M	Kenya	SP/P
Malawi	P	Senegal	SP
Nigeria	M/P	Tanzania	SP
Zambia	SP	Togo	P
		Zimbabwe	SP/P

Note: Countries where there was authoritarian breakdown are countries where the ruler who ruled during the single-party/no party era was defeated in a multiparty election or overthrown between 1990 and 2000 (see Nohlen 1999). Regime type as of 1990 is gathered from a paper by Barbara Geddes (1999) entitled "Authoritarian Breakdown: Empirical Test of a Game Theoretic Argument," presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, September 1999.

Table 6 shows that, while plausible, the argument that focuses on regime type still fails to explain much of the variation in the evidence from Africa. This is especially true when we take into consideration that distinguishing between regime types, especially between single-party and personalist regimes, is a highly subjective endeavor. Although all but one of the eight countries where autocrats were defeated or overthrown were under personalist or military regimes according to Geddes (1999b), or some combination of the two, at least three of the eight countries where autocrats survived were also personalist regimes. However, as noted above, a deeper examination of the categorization of regime types made by Geddes reveals cause to be highly suspicious of any conclusions that may be reached based on regime type. For example, it is questionable whether countries like Kenya and Zimbabwe are single-party or personalist regimes. SP/P indicates that Kenya and Zimbabwe started out the decade of the 1990s more like single-party regimes, but have, throughout the decade, become increasingly like personalist regimes. Further, it is debatable whether Nigeria was a military regime or a personalist regime throughout most of the 1990s under General Abacha. Thus, while there appears to be some evidence military regimes break down more swiftly than the other types, it is questionable whether there is much of a difference between single-party and personalist regimes. It seems that single-party regimes can evolve into personalist regimes and personalist regimes can develop into single-party regimes. Further, there is a fine line between military and personalist regimes.

While the explanations presented above are all theoretically plausible, there appears to be a significant variation that they all fail to explain. We are left to conclude that there must be another crucial variable yet unaccounted for, that is key to determining the effect of economic crisis on the break down of an authoritarian regime.

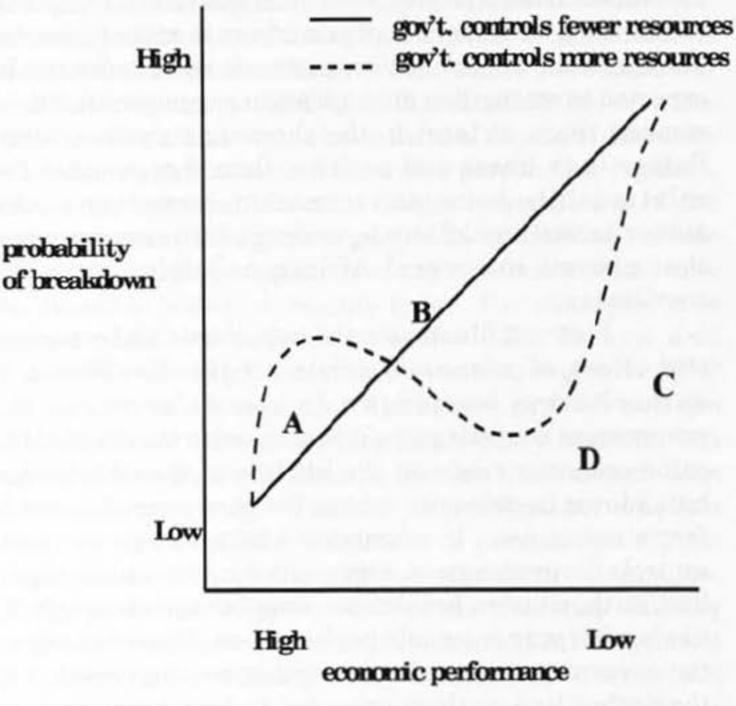
An Argument to Explain the Variation

In short, I propose that the structure of the economy, particularly the role of government, is crucial for explaining the effect of economic crisis on the likelihood that an authoritarian regime will break down. When and where the government controls access to more resources and economic opportunities, economic downturns can be expected to strengthen authoritarian regimes rather than weaken them, at least in the short- and medium-term. Rather than linear and positive, then, I argue that the relationship between economic downturns and authoritarian breakdown is, under certain circumstances that prevail in several African countries, typically curvilinear.

Figure 2 illustrates the hypothesis and contrasts the effect of economic crisis on the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown in countries where the government controls more resources with the effect of the same economic crisis on the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown in countries where the government controls fewer resources. In countries where the government controls fewer resources, represented by the solid straight line, authoritarian breakdown does become increasingly likely with poor economic performance. However, where the government controls more resources, represented by the dashed line, authoritarian breakdown becomes more likely with the onset of economic crisis, but as the economy declines further the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown becomes less likely, as illustrated by the downward curve in the line. Assuming that the continued deepening of economic crises will eventually deprive any authoritarian regime of the resources necessary to maintain patronage networks (Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Geddes 1999b), the line eventually straightens.

Figure 2

Stylized Illustration of the Argument



Note: According to the argument proposed in this paper, where and when the government controls access to the most resources, the relationship between poor economic performance and authoritarian breakdown is expected to be curvilinear. Economic crisis may lead to some political reform, such as the (re)introduction of multiparty elections, as indicated by the initial rise in the dashed line at point A, but as the economic crisis worsens the government controlling the most resources is better able to co-opt voters and opposition politicians or would-be reformers as indicated by the downward curve in the dashed line at point B. If the economy continues to worsen or reaches the "meltdown phase" (i.e., government is literally bankrupt), authoritarian breakdown is expected to become more likely, as indicated by the second rise in the dashed line at point C.

The basic logic to the argument is that when and where economic resources and rewarding career opportunities outside of government are relatively scarce, as during economic downturns, the resources and access to resources controlled by government become increasingly valuable. Therefore, the ruler and ruling party are more capable of "buying" votes at election time and co-opting members of opposition parties and other would-be reformers between elections. Therefore, political reforms that decrease the powers of the ruler and ruling party become less likely during economic downturns that are less than catastrophic.

When and where there is economic decline and the government controls fewer resources, on the other hand, the government (i.e., ruler or ruling party) can be expected to be less capable of co-opting voters, opposition politicians and would-be reformers. Institutional reforms that lessen the advantages of the ruler and ruling party become more likely under such circumstances.

Figure 3, below, illustrates the logic. The pair of lines represents the preferences of both voters and opposition politicians during economic downturns. Both voters and opposition politicians prefer, 'PR', political reform, to 'NPR', no political reform. However, voters are unlikely to vote for the opposition or otherwise support political reform (i.e., through protest) when they are employed by the government or receive some assistance from government and there is little employment or assistance outside of government, as during economic downturns. Thus, voters prefer 'GE', government employment or assistance, to 'PR', political reform. Opposition politicians are unlikely to support substantive political reform when they are offered lucrative opportunities to "work with" government, especially when such opportunities outside of government are severely limited by economic decline. Thus, opposition politicians prefer 'GE', government employment, to 'PR', political reform. Although the opposition member may be sincere about preferring reform, the risk of biting the hand that feeds during economic decline is too great.

Figure 3

Underlying Logic of the Argument

Preferences of Voters and Opposition Politicians During Economic Declines

GOVERNMENT
CONTROLS
MORE
RESOURCES

NPR < PR < GE = REFORM LESS LIKELY

GOVERNMENT
CONTROLS
FEWER
RESOURCES

NPR < PR > GE = REFORM MORE LIKLEY

NPR = no political reform
PR = political reform
GE = government employment or assistance

Note: When and where there is economic decline and the government controls more resources, voters and opposition politicians are more likely to be co-opted by the status quo party in government.

For both voters and opposition politicians, the payoffs for supporting or tolerating the status quo, not rocking the boat if you will, are immediate and certain.

The payoffs for supporting reform, on the other hand, are distant and uncertain. The risk of supporting a losing cause may be acceptable during good economic times or where the opportunities outside of government control are plentiful. But during economic declines, the risk of supporting a losing cause is high and unacceptable to most voters and opposition politicians. Voters are presented with the dilemma of having to choose between the status quo and starvation, sometimes literally. It is reasonable to assume that most will choose to support the status quo or at least refrain from openly supporting the opposition in spite of preferring political reform. The dilemma that the opposition politician faces may not be between the status quo and starvation, literally, but between being granted some lucrative place in the status quo and being relegated to the fringes of the legislature with the bare minimum of resources. During periods of economic decline, the principled supporter of reform who refuses to be co-opted is likely to be poorer than his status quo-supporting opponent, who will generally find it easier to "buy" votes from voters who are, because of economic decline, increasingly willing to sell.

The dilemma facing opposition politicians in a multiparty party setting where there is economic decline and the government controls access to many resources remains virtually the same as the dilemma that politicians face in a single-party system. Factions usually form in single-party and personalist regimes and compete for leadership positions in the party or the leader's clique, but every faction or faction member is better off if all factions remain united in office (see Geddes 1999b). Co-optation becomes the rule because, in short, there is "no salvation" outside the party or ruling clique. In a multiparty setting, when and where there is one party in power and a scarcity of resources outside of government or governmental control, opposition parties operate more like factions in a single-party regime than as distinct political parties. Parties compete for leadership positions, but politicians of every party are better off if all remain united in office. This is because, especially during economic downturns, there is "no salvation" outside of government. Although opposition politicians would ideally prefer to achieve political reforms that give them more power vis-à-vis the executive and the ruling party, this would require cooperation, which, under conditions of great scarcity, is increasingly difficult. The possibility that a critical number of major opposition members would be co-opted by the ruler or ruling party keeps a critical number of opposition members from cooperating in order to depose the long-enduring ruler and ruling party. This possibility tends to be greater during economic downturns.

The main point of the argument is that the more resources the government controls, the more likely an authoritarian regime will survive and even thrive during economic crises. The resources that the government controls may be fewer than during good economic times. Initially this gives rise to opposition and to some political change (see Haggard and Kaufman 1995). However, as the crisis persists, even the few resources to which the government controls access become increasingly valuable. Reform is likely to be stalled and authoritarian regimes that seemed to be on the brink of breakdown are likely to recover. This is because a citizenry and an opposition made more desperate by economic crises are generally more willing to tolerate the status quo in exchange for a share, even a small share, of the valuable resources under the government's (i.e., ruler or ruling party's) control.

The question remaining to be answered is, does the argument presented above provide a good explanation for why some authoritarian regimes survive economic crises? As is often the case in the social sciences, it is not possible to test the argument directly. It is impossible to get into the heads of the voters and opposition politicians so as to determine just what affects the choices they make. However, it is possible to test a hypothesis implied by the argument. Governmental expenditure on wages and salaries is one good measure of the resources that the government controls. If the argument presented above provides a good explanation, we would expect authoritarian regimes to be most resilient during economic crisis when and where governmental expenditure on wages and salaries is the greatest.

A Test of the Argument

The task at hand is to test a hypothesis implied by the argument: that economic crises make the break down of authoritarian regimes less likely especially where government spends more on wages and salaries. To consider how well governmental expenditure on wages and salaries explains the effect that economic crises have on the probability of authoritarian breakdown, logistical regression is used on a sample of African countries that were under authoritarian rule as of 1990 and for which there is data. The sample includes 17 African countries.

The dependent variable is authoritarian breakdown between 1990 and 2000. Authoritarian breakdown is a dichotomous variable that takes a value of 1 whenever there is authoritarian breakdown. Authoritarian breakdown is defined as the defeat of a long-enduring autocrat and/or ruling party in an election, as in Malawi and Zambia, a peaceful or violent coup, as in Benin, the Central African Republic and Chad, and/or a constitutional change following the death of an autocrat, as in Nigeria. Authoritarian breakdown, as defined here, *is not* synonymous with democratization. The end of one authoritarian regime may or may not be followed by a more democratic regime.

The independent variables are proxies for the various hypotheses used to explain the variation in authoritarian breakdown. They include economic growth itself, governmental expenditure on wages and salaries, regime type, growth in foreign aid, level of economic development, ethnic heterogeneity, and income inequality. Except for regime type, which is a dichotomous variable where 1 indicates single-party regime (see Geddes 1999b), all the independent variables are continuous. Economic growth is measured as the average annual growth in GNP per capita between 1985 and 1995 (see World Bank 2000a). Governmental expenditure on wages and salaries is defined as average annual governmental expenditure on wages and salaries as a percentage of GNP between 1990 and 1998 (see World Bank 2000b). Growth in foreign aid is measured as average annual growth in net real overseas development assistance (ODA) between 1990 and 1998 (World Bank 2000b). Level of development is measured as GNP per capita as of 1995 (Ibid.). Ethnic heterogeneity is measured using an index of political relevant ethnic groups (PREG) since independence (see Posner 1999). Income inequality is measured using the Gini index as of the early 1990s (see World Bank 2000a).

As Table 7 shows, the results basically support the hypothesis presented in this paper. Governmental expenditure on wages and salaries is a key variable in determining the effect that economic crises have on the probability of authoritarian breakdown. Governmental expenditure on wages and salaries shows the expected sign, having a negative effect on the probability of authoritarian breakdown that is both substantively and statistically significant. For every 1 percent increase in average annual governmental expenditure of wages and salaries, the probability of authoritarian breakdown typically decreases by between 21 and 26 percent. The relationship between governmental expenditure on wages and salaries and authoritarian breakdown is statistically significant at the 10 percent level in 4 out of 7 models in Table 7. Since significance tests are highly dependent on sample size and the sample size used here is rather small (n=17), this level of statistical significance seems adequate. None of the other variables, with the exception of regime type in 3 of the models, is statistically significant. It is worth noting that, of the other variables, foreign aid does not have the expected sign and growth in ODA is shown to increase the probability of authoritarian breakdown. This finding runs counter to

Table 7

Probability of Authoritarian Breakdown in Africa, 1990-2000
(Logistical Regression)

Independent Variables:	(I)	(II)	(III)	(IV)	(V)	(VI)	(VII)
Constant	.121	4.26	6.15	7.36	6.87	7.83	6.54
Economic Growth	.37 (.304)	.11 (.290)	.06 (.356)	--	--	--	--
Gov't. Exp. Wages	--	-.18 (.140)	-.21 (.181)	-.26** (.144)	-.23* (1.44)	-.21* (.141)	-.21* (.141)
Single-Party Regime	--	--	-1.94 (1.52)	-2.17* (1.5)	-2.17* (1.62)	-2.17* (1.57)	-1.83 (1.58)
Growth in Aid	--	--	--	--	.09 (.171)	--	--
Level of Development	--	--	--	--	.00 (.002)	--	--
Gov't. Exp. on Public Goods	--	--	--	--	--	-.00 (.13)	--
Ethnic Cleavages	--	--	--	--	--	--	-1.31 (4.73)
Inequality	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
Percent Correct:	66.7	73.3	66.7	76.5	76.5	76.5	76.9
-2 Log Likelihood	18.31	16.05	14.11	14.54	14.22	14.54	11.2
Cox & Snell R-Square	.149	.268	.357	.410	.421	.410	.376

N=17

Standard Errors in parentheses
* indicates significance at .1 level
** indicates significance at .01 level
\# indicates lack of data

the conventional wisdom, which generally leads us to expect foreign aid to prop up authoritarian regimes during economic crises. This surprising finding will be discussed in the final section of the paper.

To clarify the interpretation of the logistical coefficients, Tables 9, 10, and 11 simulate the probability of authoritarian breakdown for different levels of economic growth and governmental expenditure on wages and salaries, regime type and foreign aid respectively. The data used for these tables is taken from Table 8. In Table 9, it is striking how the probability of breakdown decreases as economic performance worsens. When governmental expenditure on wages and salaries is included, the probability of authoritarian breakdown decreases sharply as economic performance worsens. For example, with a decline in average annual GNP per capita of –5, the probability of authoritarian breakdown decreases by 29 percent when the average annual governmental expenditure on wages and salaries increases from 10 percent to 20 percent. The probability of breakdown decreases by a whopping 41 percent when the governmental expenditure on wages and salaries increases from 20 percent to 30 percent. Governmental expenditure on wages and salaries has a significantly less pronounced effect at more positive economic growth rates. For example, an increase in governmental expenditure on wages and salaries from 10 percent to 20 percent increases the probability of authoritarian breakdown by 29 percent at economic growth of –5 but by just 15 percent at an economic growth rate of +10. This points to an important trend. There is reason to think that governmental expenditures on wages and salaries decrease the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown more in countries experiencing economic crises than in countries that are not experiencing economic crises. The break down of authoritarian regimes during economic crises is significantly less likely as governmental expenditure on wages and salaries increases.

Table 8

Probability of Authoritarian Breakdown in Africa, 1990-2000

(Logistical Regression)

	(I)	(II)
Constant	.717	.239
Economic Growth	.42 (.366)	.36 (.306)
Regime Type	-1.9* (1.38)	--
Foreign Aid	--	.04 (.130)
Percent correct:	73.3	66.7
-2 log likelihood:	16.14	18.24
Cox and Snell R-Square:	.264	.153

Table 9

Authoritarian Breakdown as a Function of Economic Crisis and Governmental Expenditure on Wages and Salaries: A Simulation

Probability of Authoritarian Breakdown in 17 African Countries, 1990-2000

Average Annual Gov't Expenditure on Wages 1990-98 as % of GNP	Average Annual Economic Growth 1985-95: -5	-1	0	5	10
.10	.91	.94	.94	.97	.98
.20	.62	.72	.74	.76	.83
.30	.21	.30	.32	.45	.59
.40	.04	.07	.07	.12	.20
.50	.01	.01	.01	.02	.04

Table 10

Authoritarian Breakdown as a Function of Economic Crisis and Regime Type: A Simulation

Probability of Authoritarian Breakdown in 17 African Countries, 1990-2000

Regime Type 1990	Average Annual Economic Growth 1985-95: -5	-1	0	5
Single-Party	.96	.99	.99	1.00
Other	.99	1.00	1.00	1.00

Table 11

Authoritarian Breakdown as a Function of Economic Crisis and Growth in Foreign Aid: A Simulation

Probability of Authoritarian Breakdown in 17 African Countries, 1990-2000

Average Annual Economic Growth 1985-95

Growth in Foreign Aid (net real ODA) 1990-98	-5	-1	0	5	10
-10	.13	.38	.47	.85	.97
-5	.15	.43	.52	.87	.98
0	.17	.47	.56	.89	.98
5	.20	.51	.60	.90	.98
10	.23	.56	.64	.92	.99

Discussion of the Results

The results indicate that poor economic performance, while usually not a good thing for regime survival, may increase the chances that an authoritarian regime will survive especially under certain conditions. Evidence indicates that some of the conditions thought to explain the ability of autocrats and/or their ruling parties to survive economic crises, especially level of economic development and foreign aid, do not do a good job in explaining the survival of autocrats or, as in the case of foreign aid, have an effect that is in fact opposite from what the conventional wisdom would lead us to expect.

The results indicate that conditions that have thus far received little attention, such as the type of authoritarian regime and the amount and type of resources that the government controls, do a better job of explaining the effect of economic crises on the chances of authoritarian breakdown than other conditions that have received the bulk of attention in the literature. Although this study is a first cut at a rather small body of evidence, and there are as many or more questions raised as are answered, the results do point to important dynamics that those interested in promoting democracy in developing countries might keep in mind.

First, especially under deteriorating economic conditions, the results indicate that multiparty elections do not necessarily make the defeat of long-enduring autocrats more likely or, for that matter, make them less capable of ruling arbitrarily. In fact, economic crises, at least in the short- and mid-term, are shown to help autocrats survive in power especially where the government expends the most on wages and salaries.

Second, although regime type is shown to have a significant effect on the probability that an authoritarian regime will survive poor economic performance, there is reason to think that these results are, at least to some extent, spurious and that regime type is less important than governmental expenditure on wages and salaries or that in fact the two variables are interrelated themselves. Where there is a single-party state, it is more likely that the government payroll is larger and encompasses more people than where there is a military or personalist regime. Further, regime type is a slippery concept and the categorization of regime type is subject to disagreement. It is difficult to determine whether the regime in place in a particular country is single-party or personalist, especially where one president and one party has ruled continually for a very long time, as in Cameroon, Kenya, Gabon and Zimbabwe. Further, it is not always clear whether a regime, like the regime in Nigeria until 1998, is personalist or military. Until better definitions are developed, and perhaps this will not even help, it may be best to be skeptical about using regime type as an explanatory variable.

Third, the effect of wages and salaries should draw more attention and provoke more thought among those who intend to promote regime change in developing countries. One of the long-standing debates among those interested in the political economy of authoritarian breakdown and democratic transitions regards the sequence of change or reform. Does regime change typically precede or follow economic reform? Whereas a great deal more study is required to answer this question and, in some sense, it represents a chicken and egg type of conundrum, the evidence presented in this paper indicates that certain economic reforms are a necessary, but insufficient, condition for political reform. The results indicate that as long as the government is the primary provider of employment, regime change, not to mention democratization, is unlikely. The results support an old idea that came under attack during the 1990s. That old idea is that economic growth, and in particular the rise of private commercial class is a prerequisite for political reform (see Bates 1994). The results reported in this paper indicate that that commercial class need not be especially wealthy, because level of development seems to have little impact on the probability of authoritarian breakdown, but it does need to be. Evidence suggests that when and where a sizeable number of citizens are employed outside of government, political reform is more likely. Thus, privatization of public enterprises does appear to be a key determinant of the kind of effect that economic crises might have on the probability of authoritarian breakdown.

Fourth, although the results indicate that authoritarian breakdown is more likely during economic crises where the government employs less, the results do not indicate that the break down of authoritarian regimes is more likely where there is less government. As Table 7 shows, governmental expenditure on public goods, such as schools, roads and other kinds of infrastructure does not seem to make authoritarian breakdown less likely. Compared to the governmental expenditure on wages and salaries, governmental expenditure on public goods has a negligible effect on the probability of authoritarian breakdown in countries undergoing economic crisis.

Thus, an interesting question for further research might be, why might rulers and ruling parties be more capable of buying support with employment than with public goods? One might expect that autocrats and/or their ruling parties would use the provision of public goods to "buy" political support as effectively as provision of employment. However, according to the results reported here, this does not appear to be the case. Somehow it appears that voters/citizens resist being bought by public goods but have more difficulty doing the same with employment.

Fifth, the results indicate that, at the very least, decreasing foreign aid does not necessarily increase the probability that an authoritarian regime will break down. As Table 4 indicates, authoritarian regimes have been especially resilient where ODA has been slashed the most, such as in Gabon, Kenya, Senegal and Togo. As noted, autocrats and their ruling parties are often very good at foisting the costs of aid cutbacks on ordinary citizens, especially their opponents, for a very long time. This is not to suggest that aid should be unconditional, but that, if one's goal is to promote regime change and democratic regime change at that, there should be economic conditions, such as substantive privatization of public enterprises, as well as political conditions attached to the aid.

Finally, whereas the results do indicate that economic crises may in fact make authoritarian breakdown less likely under certain conditions, it is reasonable to assume that there comes a point when economic crises begin to weaken the regime. Thus, we are left wondering about how bad an economic crisis must become before it begins to make authoritarian breakdown more likely rather than less likely. In reference to Figure 2, the question is, how long can an economy remain at the bottom of the dashed line, at point D, where economic crisis makes regime breakdown less likely? It is altogether possible that economic performance remains poor for a very long time, but never gets poor enough to critically damage the patronage networks upon which authoritarian regimes typically rest. Thus, further research might include a temporal dimension in assessing the effects of economic crisis on the probability of authoritarian breakdown. The results indicate that there is reason to think that the duration of an economic crisis has a different political effect that the depth of a crisis. A deep and sharp economic decline that bankrupts an authoritarian regime will certainly bring an end to the regime. However, a long, but mild or moderate economic decline will not necessarily bring down an authoritarian regime and may even contribute to the survival of the regime. There is ample evidence from Africa to provide some preliminary support for this hypothesis. Among other things, further research should expand the number of cases, including both countries inside and outside of Africa, and increase the amount of qualitative evidence to supplement the quantitative evidence.

APPENDIX

	Average annual growth in GNP per capita 1985-95	Avg. annual govt expen., wages and salaries 1990-98 as % of GNP	single-party regime = 1	Avg. annual growth in net ODA from all donors (real) 1990-98	GNP per capita 1995	Avg. annual gross public investment as % of GNP 1990-98	PREG	GINI 1990s	Authoritarian breakdown =1
Benin	-.03	30.6	0	-2.3	370	7.6	0.3		1
Cape Verde	1.1	22	0	0.4	660	26.8			1
Malawi	-.07	19.7	0	-4	170	9.4	0.49		1
Nigeria	1.2	8.5	0	-7.5	460	9.1	0.37	50.6	1
CAR	-2.4	28.4	0	-8.4	340	7	0.33	61.3	1
Chad	.6	24.8	0	-3.2	180	8.2			1
Guinea	1.4	23	0	-1.4	550	6.4		40.3	1
Zambia	-.08	20.7	1	5.3	400	6.4	0.71	49.8	1
Ghana	1.4	20.5	0	-4.4	390	11.3	0.44	32.7	0
Gabon	-8.2	29.1	1	-7.9	3490	6	0.21		0
Tanzania	1	23.5	1	-3.8	120	3.2	0.5	38.2	0
Burkina Faso	-.2	27.4	0	2.1	230	9.8		48.2	0
Cameroon	-6.6	33.8	0	-1.8	650	2.2	0.73		0
Kenya	-.01	28.2	1	-11.1	280	15.7	0.57	44.5	0
Senegal	-.1	37.9	1	-6.5	600	5	0.14	41.3	0
Togo	-2.7	35.4	0	-7.9	310	3.6	0.49		0
Zimbabwe	-.6	35.6	1	0.4	540	3.1	0.41	56.8	0

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Notes

[1] In this sense, authoritarian breakdown is considered to be a necessar, but insufficient, condition for democratization. Typically, long-enduring autocrats must go, and long-ruling parties lose their majority in legislatures before democratization takes place.

[2] For example, although Kenneth Kaunda and his party, the United National Independence Party (UNIP), lost the first multiparty election in Zambia in 1992 to Frederick Chiluba and his party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), Chiluba has become at least as autocratic as Kaunda and the MMD has proven at least as capable as UNIP in discouraging dissent.

[3] That reform may or may not be "democratic".

[4] According to Boix (2001), the response of the wealthy, as well as the response of the poor, depends on the extent to which capital is fixed or specific to a particularly country. Where capital is more fixed, the wealthy are expected to repress the poor. Where capital is mobile, the wealthy are expected to be less likely to repress because they can move their capital. The threat of this may prevent the poor from revolting.

[5] Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income in a country deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. An index of zero represents perfect equality while an index of 100 equals perfect inequality (see World Bank 2000a).

[6] The PREG index, using the Hirschman-Herfindahl concentration formula, basically represents the probability that two randomly chosen individuals in a

given country would be of different *politically relevant* ethno-linguistic groups. Politically relevant is determined by identifying evidence that members of an ethno-linguistic group acted collectively as an ethno-linguistic group in contesting for political power at the national level in a given country since independence (see Posner 1999). The PREG index considers that even in countries where ethnic identity is politically salient, not all ethnic groups are politically active as ethnic groups.

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