Claims to legitimacy count: Why sanctions fail to instigate democratisation in authoritarian regimes

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Abstract. International sanctions are one of the most commonly used tools to instigate democratisation in the post-Cold War era. However, despite long-term sanction pressure by the European Union, the United States and/or the United Nations, non-democratic rule has proven to be extremely persistent. Which domestic and international factors account for the regimes’ ability to resist external pressure? Based on a new global dataset on sanctions from 1990 to 2011, the results of a fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) provide new insights for the research on sanctions and on authoritarian regimes. Most significantly, sanctions strengthen authoritarian rule if the regime manages to incorporate their existence into its legitimation strategy. Such an unintended ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect occurs where sanctions are imposed on regimes that possess strong claims to legitimacy and have only limited economic and societal linkages to the sender of sanctions.

Keywords: sanctions; democratisation; claims to legitimacy; fsQCA; authoritarian regimes

Introduction: Sanctions and the persistence of authoritarian rule

Despite the frequent use of international sanctions to instigate democratisation in authoritarian regimes across the globe (Cortright & Lopez 2000), targeted regimes such as Belarus, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea and Syria have stubbornly withstood such external pressure in the post-Cold War era. What accounts for this phenomenon? A number of studies explore the unintended effects of sanctions on human rights and democratisation (e.g., Peksen & Drury 2010; Peksen 2009). However, relatively little is known about the circumstances under which external pressure actually helps to stabilise non-democratic rule.

Sanction scholars have found that the domestic characteristics of the targeted regimes mediate the effect of external sanctions (Allen 2005; Lektzian & Souva 2007). At the same time, the research on authoritarianism increasingly acknowledges that specific and diffuse international pressure influences the fate of authoritarian regimes (e.g., Levitsky & Way 2010). However, despite notable exceptions (Escribà-Folch & Wright 2010; Escribà-Folch 2012), research on sanctions and authoritarian regimes has not yet been brought together. By integrating these two strands of research systematically, we provide new insights into how the interaction of domestic and international factors determines the effects of sanctions on authoritarian rule. When scholars have explicitly analysed the interplay of sanctions and domestic factors, they have focused on regime types and repression. In contrast, we show that different claims to legitimacy in authoritarian regimes (Gerschewski 2013; Kailitz 2013) play a crucial role in explaining how they withstand external pressure because they manage to use them to their advantage as symbols in the struggle for legitimation (Galtung 1967; Lindsay 1986).
We utilise a fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to analyse the persistence of authoritarian rule in regimes under sanctions since the end of the Cold War in the period 1990–2010. The method is particularly suitable for identifying different causal pathways that lead to the same outcome. This is of key relevance, as prior sanctions research suggests that the specific interplay of multiple conditions at the domestic and the international levels – rather than the presence or absence of a certain variable – explains the varying effects of sanctions on autocracies (Allen 2005). For the analysis, we created novel datasets on European Union, United Nations and United States sanctions imposed on authoritarian regimes in the period under study and on authoritarian legitimation strategies based on an original survey of leading country experts.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present hypotheses on the relevant internal and external factors that influence the persistence of authoritarian rule in regimes under sanctions, based on an integration of findings from research on authoritarian regimes and sanctions. We then introduce fsQCA as the method of analysis and outline the operationalisation of the outcome and the conditions. Our results presented in the next section underscore the crucial role of legitimation strategies in explaining the persistence of authoritarian regimes under sanctions. Following the discussion of robustness checks, we conclude and recommend avenues for further research in the final section.

**Accounting for the persistence of authoritarian rule**

We analyse the persistence of authoritarian rule in non-democratic regimes under sanctions – in other words: the question of why sanctions fail to instigate democratisation in the targeted authoritarian regimes. We understand democratisation (i.e., the move towards democracy) as a continuum rather than as binary. The alternative strategy of only measuring the actual transition to liberal democracy would seriously truncate the dependent variable, and hence entail the risk of missing the gradual democratic improvements that oftentimes occur in autocratic contexts (Elkins 2000; Verkuilen & Munck 2002).

**Sanction comprehensiveness**

Following Jentleson (2000: 126), we understand international sanctions as the ‘denial . . . of relations by one or more states (sender[s]) intended to influence the behaviour of another state (target) on noneconomic issues or to limit its military capabilities’. We focus on sanctions that are not only threatened, but are also implemented. Despite contrasting theoretical expectations about the effectiveness of threatened sanctions (Drezner 2003; Morgan et al. 2009; Whang et al. 2013), authoritarian regimes rarely concede to sanction threats (Von Soest & Wahman 2014). Authoritarian rulers try to withstand external pressure to liberalise as long as possible (for personalised rulers, see Bratton & Van de Walle 1997: 83). Sanctions limit the flow of resources to such regimes and/or act as symbols of outside disapproval (Lindsay 1986). In turn, all types of sanctions potentially affect the persistence of authoritarian rule in negative or positive ways, irrespective of whether they directly or indirectly aim at democratisation or at changing certain policies (Jones & Portela 2014: 9).
According to the traditional ‘punishment theory’ (Lektzian & Souva 2007: 850), the economic harm caused by sanctions directly translates into domestic political pressure that forces rulers to comply with external demands. Scholars have indeed shown that sanctions are more likely to succeed if they are more economically costly to the target state (Morgan et al. 2009). However, stressing the discursive reactions to sanctions, some scholars have argued that sanctions – particularly comprehensive ones that target a whole economy and/or population – create a siege mentality and thereby trigger a ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect (Allen 2005; Galtung 1967). Authoritarian rulers regularly demonise external sanctions and use them as a legitimising device, especially if their rule is based on strong legitimation strategies. Based on this reasoning we propose the following hypothesis:

Sanctions hypothesis: All types of sanctions contribute to the persistence of authoritarian rule if discursively exploited by the ruling elite to rally for support vis-à-vis a common enemy. Whether the ruling elite can use sanctions in its favour depends on this condition’s interaction with other factors, especially the regime’s claims to legitimacy and a low linkage to the sender, which makes it easier to discredit sanctions.

Domestic factors: Claims to legitimacy and repression

In his seminal work, Wintrobe (1998) discusses how dictators balance two ‘input factors’ in order to secure their rule: ‘loyalty’ and ‘repression’. Most fundamentally, a regime’s claim to legitimacy is important for explaining its means of rule and, ultimately, its persistence (Brady 2009; Easton 1965; Wintrobe 1998), because relying on sheer force alone is too costly a way of maintaining authoritarian stability in the long term.

‘Legitimacy’ is a slippery concept. It is crucial to distinguish claims to legitimacy ‘made by virtually every state in the modern era’ (Gilley 2009: 10) about their ‘righteous’ political and social order (e.g., ideologies; see below) from legitimacy itself (i.e., the regime’s acceptance among the population). In contrast to most of existing literature, we focus on the different foundations upon which various autocracies claim legitimacy and not on the acceptance among the population. We argue that strong theoretical and empirical reasons indicate that legitimacy claims fundamentally shape an authoritarian regime’s means of rule and, ultimately, its susceptibility to external pressure (Burnell 2006: 545).

First, a strong claim to legitimacy may enhance elite cohesion by strengthening common identities, which boosts commitment as well as organisational coherence (Barker 2001; LeBas 2011). Strong legitimacy foundations are being forged, inter alia, through revolutionary – ideological and violent – struggles. Levitsky and Way’s (2013) conceptualisation of ‘revolutionary regimes’ provides fresh insights into specific authoritarian regimes’ characteristics and, inter alia, the role of legitimization and strong claims thereof. Such in-group/out-group distinctions that justify group boundaries and produce elite-binding narratives are, however, also enhanced by other legitimation strategies – for example, by advocating certain performance goals (Alagappa 1995).

Second, the sources of legitimization set the limits within which actors can voice opposition (Alagappa 1995: 4; Thompson 2001) by inherently influencing structures of power, domination and dissent (Hurrell 2005; Weber 1978). For example, Schlumberger (2010) analyses how the Middle Eastern monarchies use religious claims to legitimacy to avert the
rise of (Islamic) opposition movements. This agenda-restricting function can ultimately result in the marginalisation of potentially viable resistance (Thompson 2001), which, in turn, enhances the stability of authoritarian regimes.

Third, claims to legitimacy, be they based on the regime’s origin, ruler, performance, procedures or the combination thereof (see below), amplify the authoritarian regime’s prospects of successfully creating perceptions of legitimacy – that is, acceptance among the population (Case 1995: 104). Concurrently, for Hurrell (2005: 23), giving reasons and persuasion ‘as to why a course of action, a rule, or a political order is right and appropriate’ is the ‘most important element’ of legitimacy. Thus, claims to legitimacy allow a regime to maintain their entitlement to rule, particularly when facing potentially dangerous political or economic crises. For instance, Magaloni (2006: 151–174) finds that in authoritarian hegemonic party systems voters’ long-term political loyalties may persist even in the face of economic decline (for a similar early argument, see Huntington 1968).

Authoritarian regimes’ claims to legitimacy are thus not ‘cheap talk’ but actually have fundamental political repercussions as regards elite cohesion, the voicing of dissent and regime acceptance. Research also highlights that sanctions are regularly used as symbols in the struggle for legitimation (Galtung 1967; Lindsay 1986), but more systematic comparative analyses are still lacking.

In line with the seminal work by Weber (1978), Easton (1965) and Beetham (1991), many studies have underlined the concept’s multidimensional nature (Alagappa 1995; Burnell 2006). Based on these frameworks, we argue that a regime’s legitimation strategy can be built upon six dimensions: ideology, foundational myth, personalism, international engagement, procedural mechanisms and performance (i.e., for the claim to be successful in producing political, social or economic outcomes). Such claims to legitimacy are not mutually exclusive. There is wide consensus that real-world cases are characterised by ‘highly complex variations, transitional forms and combinations of these pure types’ (Weber 2004: 34). Reliance on one dimension is regularly not sufficient (see Maghraoui (2001) on Morocco and Schutz (1995) on Mozambique) as this makes the regimes vulnerable to changing domestic and international circumstances.

Claims to legitimacy are not developed in a political vacuum. For example, Levitsky and Way (2013) discuss how ‘revolutionary regimes’ use similar claims to legitimacy that can be traced back to their genesis. Yet the fact that they originate both from classic social revolutions and national liberation struggles and promote rather different societal models (compare, for example, the ideological bases of China, Iran and Zimbabwe) attests that their origin contributes to but does not determine the respective regime’s legitimation strategy. Moreover, the basis upon which regimes claim legitimacy is not merely an outflow of government structures (Norris 1999). While regimes make use of the existence of certain institutions as well as their genesis in their legitimation discourse, these are not only invoked to different degrees, but in specific combinations.

Previous research has demonstrated that sanctions negatively affect the level of human rights protection and induce increased repression in targeted regimes (Peksen & Drury 2010; Peksen 2009; Wood 2008). While the ‘law of coercive responsiveness’ – the fact that regimes increase repression when threatened – is now well-established (Davenport 2007: 7), less is known about the success of such strategies. Some autocratic regimes tend to compensate for their lack of strong claims to legitimacy through an overdeveloped security

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apparatus (Merkel 2010: 59–62), and, in turn, repression (Davenport 2007; Wintrobe 1998) – especially when they are faced with external pressure. On the other hand, regimes with strong claims to legitimacy are often characterised by low levels of regime repression (Booth & Seligson 2005). In the short term, repression might ensure the endurance of authoritarian rule by suppressing and deterring challenges to the regime; particularly severe repression, however, may also sow the seeds of the authoritarian regime’s own instability (Davenport 2007; Wintrobe 1998) when excessive use of force alienates the population.

Hence, we distinguish between two different forms of repression to gain a more nuanced understanding of when regimes resort to coercion to withstand external pressure and which types of repression they apply. We understand hard repression as ‘high-visibility acts’ such as violent police actions, detentions, torture or extrajudicial killings. In contrast, soft repression includes low-intensity but still visible acts such as low-profile physical harassment or localised attacks, denial of employment or public services and the use of regulatory apparatuses (Earl 2006; Levitsky & Way 2010).

**Domestic factors hypothesis:** We expect a regime’s claim to legitimacy to interact with the degree of repression, so that regimes with a strong claim to legitimacy only need to resort to soft repression to survive external sanction pressure.

**Linkage and vulnerability**

Sanction research overwhelmingly agrees that the international relations of targeted regimes mediate the effect of sanctions (Early 2011; Hufbauer et al. 2007; McLean & Whang 2010). This relationship between the initiator of sanctions (‘sender’) and the targeted regime (‘target’) is characterised by two closely intertwined elements: the linkage between the sender and the target; and the target’s vulnerability to external pressure.

Earlier transition studies have described the process of democratisation as a predominantly domestic affair (O’Donnell et al. 1986: 5). Only more recently have democratisation scholars emphasised its international dimension and discussed different ways of exerting influence from the outside (Brinks & Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch & Ward 2006). In that context, the concept of ‘leverage’ is used to assess the direct influence that a (Western) power has over the targeted regime (Levitsky & Way 2010). Likewise, sanctions research has found that less powerful targets are more likely to yield to sanctions (Drury 1998; Jing et al. 2003). Such vulnerability can be assuaged by third-party assistance (Early 2011; McLean & Whang 2010) from so-called ‘black knights’ (Hufbauer et al. 2007: 8).

Amicable political and economic relations between target and sender, on the other hand, increase the overall effectiveness of coercive measures (Allen 2005; Jing et al. 2003). A regime’s ‘moral condemnation’ is more difficult to dismiss if a strong identification with the sender of sanctions exists (Galtung 1967: 399). Likewise, Levitsky and Way (2010) demonstrate that linkage – understood as the density of ties and cross-border flows between two parties – increases the prospects of democracy promotion effects. They suggest that international democratisation pressure is most pronounced when both linkage and leverage are high (Levitsky & Way 2010: 5).
Linkage and vulnerability hypothesis: Both weak sender-target linkage and a lack of target vulnerability negatively affect the ability of sanctions to induce democratisation. We furthermore expect that a lack of linkage particularly undermines sanctions effectiveness if it interacts with strong claims to legitimacy.

Method and data

We use a set-theoretical approach – more precisely fsQCA – to analyse how the outlined conditions affect the persistence of authoritarian rule in countries under sanctions. The sample consists of 120 episodes of sanctions enacted against authoritarian regimes over the 20-year period of 1990–2010 (see Web Appendix A). We apply a broad understanding of ‘authoritarian regimes’, meaning all those that exhibit defects with regard to political participation, competition and/or the rule of law (Linz 2000; Merkel 2010). To identify these regimes, we use the Authoritarian Regime dataset (ARD) (Wahman et al. 2013), which is based on a combined Freedom House and Polity IV measure. According to their most current classification, a country is regarded as authoritarian or non-democratic in a certain year if its score is lower than 7.0 on the ten-point index.

QCA – and especially its fuzzy set variant – is based on the idea that causal relations are better understood in terms of set-theoretic relations than of correlations (Grofman & Schneider 2009; Ragin 2000, 2008). Hence, fsQCA allows for the study of complex causal relations and multiple interactions, including the identification of INUS conditions while linear regression cannot go beyond two- or three-way interactions, which are, moreover, difficult to interpret (Fiss et al. 2013). As outlined, current research indeed suggests that the comprehensiveness of sanctions interacts with additional domestic characteristics such as the level of repression or the regime’s claim to legitimacy. Second, fsQCA helps us to understand multilevel phenomena by allowing for the possibility that conditions on one level, such as the domestic one, may have a unique effect depending on their interplay with conditions at another level, such as the international one (Lacey & Fiss 2009: 25). Third, fsQCA addresses ‘equifinality’, meaning that different configurations might lead to the outcome observed (Bennett & Elman 2006). In contrast, sanctions research has often focused on the identification of a single condition; a strategy that, according to Allen (2005: 135), has tended to ‘blind researchers and policymakers to the possibility that there can be substitutable causal processes at work’.

Persistence of authoritarian rule

The analysed sample consists of all authoritarian regimes that were targeted by EU, UN and United States sanctions between 1990 and 2010. We follow the ARD by Wahman et al. (2013). We use the year before the imposition of sanctions as the baseline. These values are compared to the average values in the time period of sanctions and the following five years (if sanctions are ongoing, 2012 is taken as the endpoint). Including the five-year period after the end of sanctions represents a conservative measure as it sets a high threshold for the outcome (lack of democratisation) and avoids the classification of cases as ‘persistent’ in which sanctions exert a democratisation effect with a certain time lag.
As we can draw on interval-scaled data, we are able to use the direct method of calibration developed by Ragin (2000), which represents major progress regarding the calibration procedure (Schneider & Wagemann 2012: 36). In order to convert the raw data into fuzzy values, three qualitative anchors must be defined: non-membership (0), the crossover point (0.5) and full membership (1). If a regime has stagnating or deteriorating values in the ARD, we interpret this as full membership in the set ‘persistence of authoritarian rule’ and code this as 1. The 0.5 qualitative anchor is located at an increase of 0.8 points, which constitutes a notable gap in the raw data. Countries such as the former Republic of Yugoslavia, which doubtlessly experienced significant democratisation in the period of concern (Kaldor & Vejvoda 2002), are accordingly assigned to the low subset (‘democratisation’) while countries such as the Central African Republic and Togo, which experienced regression (Carothers 2002: 9, 15), are assigned to the high subset. The 1.0 anchor, the threshold to full democratisation, is located at another gap in the raw data (plus two points in the ARD) and furthermore exhibits cases of meaningful democratisation.

**Sanction comprehensiveness**

The calibration distinguishes comprehensive and targeted sanctions and uses the differentiation of these two types of sanctions to determine the cross-over point of 0.5. Targeted sanctions comprise measures that focus on a specific group of people or a specific economic sector, including all blacklist-based sanctions (visa bans and asset freezes), diplomatic sanctions and sanctions targeting the military sector (arms embargos and halting of military cooperation). In contrast, comprehensive sanctions target the economy and/or population as a whole, and consist of financial sanctions, commodity and trade embargos as well as development aid sanctions (Portela & Von Soest 2012). A comprehensive trade embargo or a commodity embargo is interpreted as full membership, whereas all types of targeted sanctions, including targeted military ones, constitute full non-membership.

**Claims to legitimacy**

Assessing legitimacy is a notoriously difficult undertaking, particularly in authoritarian regimes. The opaque and repressive nature of authoritarian regimes renders it extremely difficult to conduct representative public opinion surveys, to pick random samples or to conduct qualitative interviews to assess a regime’s legitimacy (Schedler et al. 1999: 20). In response, we conducted a Regime Legitimation Expert Survey (RLES) to capture the following six legitimation strategies outlined above: ideology, foundational myth, personalism, international engagement, procedural mechanisms and performance by claiming to satisfy social and economic needs. The experts were asked to give their assessment on a six-point scale. While claims to legitimacy are potentially adjusted over time, a reserve of strategies accumulates over years, regularly leaving a regime’s fundamental claims intact (Easton 1965; Lipset 1959). In response, the expert assessments of the RLES focus on authoritarian regimes’ core claims to legitimacy.

As ‘no single resource appears adequate in itself’ (Alagappa 1995: 50), we calculate the average of the expert’s assessment of all six dimensions for each country in the respective time period. In order to calibrate the fuzzy values, we again apply the direct method of
calibration. The lowest average assessment across all dimensions (1.25) constitutes full non-membership (i.e., weak claims to legitimacy). An average of 3.75 (on the 0–5 scale) was interpreted as full membership using China’s disproportionally pronounced legitimation strategy to identify the qualitative 1.0 anchor (for such an approach, see Emmenegger 2011). Taking into account the necessity to simultaneously invoke various legitimation sources to build a robust legitimation strategy, we set the cross-over point at 2.5 as this requires above average assessments for at least five dimensions or very high values in at least three legitimation dimensions.

**Repression**

The degree of repression is assessed on the basis of the Political Terror Scale (PTS) dataset (Wood & Gibney 2010: 368–370). Using both United States State Department and Amnesty International reports, PTS levels 4 and 5 – which denote state murders, torture and other serious infringements of physical integrity – constitute ‘hard repression’, whereas PTS levels 1–3 characterise ‘soft repression’. The cross-over point to distinguish soft from hard repression is set at the value of 3.5 on the combined five-point scale, using therein the average time period during which the regime was under sanctions. Full membership and no membership are again defined in accordance with the verbalisation of PTS scores.

**Vulnerability**

The target’s vulnerability to outside pressure is calibrated on the basis of its military and economic strength, which may be bolstered by third-party assistance. Military strength is assessed on the basis of military expenditure (SIPRI 2013) and the capability to construct and use nuclear weapons (Jo & Gartzke 2007); for economic strength we use the respective country’s gross domestic product (GDP). The presence of sanction busters is a dichotomous measure based on the Hufbauer et al. (2007) dataset and the Economist Intelligence Unit country reports for the missing cases.

In line with thresholds applied by Levitsky and Way (2010: 373), we suggest that a country’s economic capabilities need to exceed a specific threshold (GDP of US$50 billion) in order to effectively lower its vulnerability. In addition to their debate about nuclear weapons reducing Western leverage (Levitsky & Way 2010: 273), we interpret annual military expenditure in excess of US$1 billion as effectively lowering a country’s vulnerability. This not only constitutes a major gap in the raw data, but assigns recognised military powers, such as Syria, to the high subset. Finally, ‘black knights’ are included as a third component. Following Levitsky and Way’s (2010) aggregation procedure, we assume that meeting one of these three criteria reduces a country’s vulnerability enough to assign the country to the ‘low vulnerability subset’, which therefore represents the 0.5 crossover point. Being able to draw on several of these sources further reduces vulnerability. Hence, meeting all three criteria amounts to non-existent vulnerability (full membership), whereas the lack of any meaningful military, respective economic power or third-party assistance in line with the criteria discussed above constitutes full non-membership.
Linkage encompasses economic and social, respectively communicative and geographic, ties. Economic ties are operationalised as trade, with the five economically most important EU Member States and the United States, in the year before the implementation of sanctions for all types of senders included in the dataset on the basis of the Correlates of War dyadic trade data (Gleditsch 2002). The data on geographic distance is taken from the Gleditsch (2001) dataset on distance between capital cities, always using the sender of sanctions that is geographically closest (if there is more than one) and Brussels for EU sanctions. We use potential cross-border communication – measured as the extent of internet access per 1,000 inhabitants (see Levitsky & Way 2010: 374) – to operationalise social linkage (World Bank 2011). While this only constitutes a proxy for social ties, potentially more insightful data on diaspora populations or the number of citizens traveling to and studying in the EU and United States, was only available for the minority of the countries included in our sample.

Linkage has a cluster effect, meaning that the cumulative impact of ties in different areas shapes the outcome (Levitsky & Way 2006: 50). Hence, we construct an additive index by converting all three dimensions of linkage into scales ranging from 0 to 5, meaning that the highest potential linkage value is 15, the lowest 0, which is then transferred into a six-value fuzzy scale (for such an approach, see Emmenegger 2011). The cross-over point is set at 7.5, meaning that a country must have at least average ratings in all three or above average rating in two dimensions. The threshold for full membership is set at 13 points on the index, so that, inter alia, the clear-cut high linkage case Croatia belongs to the highest category while 2 points and less are interpreted as full non-membership, based on cases such as North Korea and Myanmar.7

Results and discussion

In our analysis, five conditions lead to 32 possible configurations of conditions (Figure 1). The fact that variation also occurs between different episodes targeting the same countries confirms our decision to focus on occurrences of sanctions rather than country cases as the unit of analysis. The analysis only displays four logical remainders – that is, theoretically possible combinations for which no empirical cases exist (see Web Appendix B). Consequently, the difference between the complex and the parsimonious solution is so small that we only report the complex solution, which does not rely on counterfactual assumptions that are difficult to interpret (Schneider & Wagemann 2012: 162). Using a frequency cut-off of one empirical case and a minimum consistency level of 0.75 in line with commonly discussed requirements (Schneider & Wagemann 2012: 279), five pathways constitute sufficient combinations of conditions for the outcome.8 Table 1 presents the solution formula in Boolean notation.

Strong claims to legitimacy account for authoritarian persistence

Our analysis systematically confirms previous findings from case studies that strong claims to legitimacy help a regime to withstand external sanction pressure. Examples from three
cases illustrate the three causal mechanisms at work. First, strong claims to legitimacy help authoritarian regimes to bolster in-group cohesion of the ruling elite. In Zimbabwe, for instance, government ministers of the ruling ZANU-PF feared to be marked as ‘sell-outs’ when being removed from the EU list of restrictive measures (Tendi 2010). Second, strong claims to legitimacy enable regimes to turn criticism of the incumbent into a critique of the nation as such and thereby delegitimise it. The legitimacy claims of Uzbekistan’s government, which are based on radical-anti Islamism and ethnic Uzbek nationalism, ruled out the
voicing of dissent by Muslim minorities as alien (March 2003; Schatz 2006). In a similar manner, discursive isolation was used to deal with dissent in Ethiopia (Abbink 2009) and Zimbabwe (Grebe 2010). Finally, strong legitimation strategies may increase the likelihood that the population buys into such claims. Referring to its liberation war credentials and refusing ‘neo-imperialist’ interference in internal affairs, Zimbabwe’s ZANU-PF staged a vocal anti-sanctions campaign, which found resonance among the population (Eriksson 2007). Building on different claims, the Ethiopian regime managed to bolster its legitimacy based on electoral procedures (Tronvoll 2009).

As for the relationship to other conditions, the first configuration (see Figure 1 above) confirms our foremost expectation that if an authoritarian regime under sanctions draws on a strong claim to legitimacy, it only needs to resort to soft repression to ensure authoritarian persistence. For instance, Alexander Lukashenka’s rule in Belarus is characterised by a combination of soft repression and a strong overall claim to legitimacy based on nationalism (Way 2012). Rather than directly infringing the physical wellbeing of its people, the regime regularly uses comparably low-intensity means of repression, such as censorship of the opposition press and increasing the rent for the public buildings used by nongovernmental organisations (Gaidelytė 2010: 60). After the imposition of sanctions, physical repression in the country even declined up until 2004, as structures supporting the regime had been previously established, with stable economic welfare, comparatively low social inequality and a pronounced nationalism being the most important pillars of Lukashenka’s enduring popularity (Gaidelytė 2010: 80). In some cases, the rulers actively used the comprehensive sanctions imposed on their country in their discourses to strengthen their regime’s claims to legitimacy. For example, sanctions against Cuba reinforced the anti-American sentiments that the Castro regime – which is characterised by a strong foundational myth – referred to in order to consolidate its hold on power (Schreiber 1973: 405).

Second, and in line with our expectations, the interaction of strong claims to legitimacy at the domestic level and a low linkage to the sender at the international one explains the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causal pathways</th>
<th>Raw coverage</th>
<th>Unique coverage</th>
<th>Consistency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLAIMS TO LEGITIMACY*repression+</td>
<td>0.402838</td>
<td>0.052719</td>
<td>0.781647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLAIMS TO LEGITIMACY*linkage+</td>
<td>0.465294</td>
<td>0.073167</td>
<td>0.789101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLAIMS TO LEGITIMACY*comprehensiveness+</td>
<td>0.464181</td>
<td>0.042843</td>
<td>0.817692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vulnerability<em>LINKAGE</em></td>
<td>0.227292</td>
<td>0.023091</td>
<td>0.793204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPREHENSIVENESS*REPRESSION+</td>
<td>0.195298</td>
<td>0.038948</td>
<td>0.866667</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

→ PERSISTENCE OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE

Solution coverage 0.719710
Solution consistency 0.778396

Note: In Boolean algebra, * stands for the logical operator ‘and’, whereas + represents the logical operator ‘or’. Uppercase letters denote the presence of a condition, whereas lowercase letters denote the opposite.
persistence of authoritarian rule in spite of the external pressure stemming from sanctions, as shown by the second configuration. Little societal, economic and/or political integration with the sender makes it easier to incorporate any discrediting sanctions into the regime’s narrative justifying its right to rule. As the linkages are low, there are limited alternative channels, be it through social networks, business contacts or media, to counter official discourses of the rulers. This in turn reinforces the regime’s claims to legitimacy, and ultimately its persistence. In cases of a low linkage, the success or failure of authoritarianism depends to a greater extent on domestic factors and is less responsive to external sanctions. For instance, the maintenance of authoritarian rule in Uzbekistan is facilitated by low linkages (Way & Levitsky 2007: 56) and, as outlined above, a legitimacy claim rooted in ethnic nationalism, which is not susceptible to pro-liberalisation claims (Schatz 2006: 269).9

In contrast to previous literature (Galtung 1967: 389; Lindsay 1986: 162), the third configuration highlights that not only comprehensive but also rather targeted sanctions may lead to ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effects, which in turn contributes to the persistence of authoritarian rule. In particular, when authoritarian rulers can resort to strong legitimation strategies, sanctions of any kind may be perceived as being an attack on the entire society and, in turn, authoritarian regimes can thus successfully create a siege mentality. In the case of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe portrays himself as the stalwart of Zimbabwean sovereignty and the Zimbabwean people’s interests. Despite the recent softening of the targeted sanctions, the ruling party’s ZANU-PF spokesperson stressed that: ‘Once the head of state remains under sanctions, the entire state remains under sanctions’ (Deutsche Welle 2014), showing how even extremely narrow sanctions may be exploited to garner support of the population. The first, second and third paths clearly demonstrate the crucial relevance of strong claims to legitimacy for securing authoritarian rule in more than two-thirds of all the cases of autocratic persistence.

Interestingly, both a lack of vulnerability and low linkage are important for explaining the failure of comprehensive and targeted sanctions. This is indicated by the fourth and fifth configuration. This supports the previous findings in sanctions research regarding the importance of a regime’s vulnerability as well as Levitsky and Way’s (2010: 351) emphasis on the importance of linkage for externally induced democratisation.

Robustness of results

Our solution has a coverage of 0.719710, meaning that slightly more than 70 per cent of the empirical cases are in line with the set-theoretical relations of the solution in accounting for the outcome. The consistency, which specifies the degree to which the empirical observations are in accordance with the postulated set relations (Schneider & Wagemann 2012: 324), is 0.778396; in other words, the consistency stands at almost 80 per cent, thereby reaching the commonly accepted requirements for significant solutions (Ragin 2008).

In 16 episodes, autocracy levels that should have remained persistent – due to membership in at least one configuration – showed signs of improvement instead. Most of these cases are related to the sanctions that were imposed on the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, where military interventions explained democratisation despite unfavourable conditions. A total of 60 of the 76 sanction episodes that showed no improvement in the level of
democracy are covered by at least one of the five configurations. Thus, 16 cases of non-democratisation are not explained. However, six of these episodes, such as Madagascar, are still ongoing or the sanctions were just recently removed, so that the calibration of these episodes as instances of non-democratisation might still change in the near future.

For large-N QCA with more than 100 cases, a number of robustness checks have been established as good practice. Our analysis passes these four fundamental tests, which strongly confirm the robustness of the results. First, Marx (2010) developed a benchmark model specifying the desirable ratio of conditions to cases; for large-N QCA, a maximum condition-to-case ratio of 0.2 was suggested, which we clearly realise with a much lower ratio of 0.04.

Second, using a different frequency threshold to determine which configurations of conditions are included in the minimisation process helps to avoid creating potential deviant case errors. As mentioned above, in our analysis we used a frequency cut-off of one empirically existent case. For samples containing more than 50 cases, Maggetti and Levi-Faur (2013: 203) propose using a frequency threshold of two cases (see also Skaaning 2011: 402). In our analysis this leads to a very similar solution formula in which the first three configurations are completely identical and one only slightly altered. This again confirms our findings (see Web Appendix D).

Third, differences between the complex, the intermediate and the parsimonious solution allow us to distinguish core causal conditions – which are part of both the parsimonious and intermediate solution – from causally peripheral ones (Fiss 2011). In our study, the three configurations containing claims to legitimacy remain present in the intermediate and parsimonious solution (see Web Appendix D) and hence constitute such core elements, for which a strong relationship with the outcome exists.

Finally and most importantly, changes in the sample strongly confirm the robustness of our results (Skaaning 2011). Using both the Democracy and Dictatorship dataset (Cheibub et al. 2009) and the one of Geddes et al. (2011) to compile the sample of authoritarian regimes under sanctions, yields remarkably stable results. All configurations except for the last one remain identical when comparing the parsimonious solutions;10 coverage and consistency levels are also extremely similar (see Web Appendix D).

Conclusion: Claims to legitimacy count

Despite the surge of the third wave of democratisation, a certain crop of authoritarian regimes – including those in Belarus, Cuba, Eritrea, North Korea and Zimbabwe – has stubbornly resisted sanction-related pressure that potentially destabilises targeted regimes. In these countries, it is the strong claims to legitimacy’s interplay with other conditions that have most significantly influenced the failure of sanctions to undermine the persistence of authoritarian rule. If sanctions are imposed on regimes with compelling legitimisation strategies, they regularly help the regime to stabilise its rule. To incorporate sanctions into regimes’ legitimisation narratives is easier when only weak ties to the sender of sanctions exist, as this constrains the senders’ ability to communicate the underlying goals of the sanctions. Distant senders are often branded as enemies and their sanctions as an unjust imperialist infringement of the country’s sovereignty.
In this respect, our findings systematically confirm earlier case studies discussing the role of sanctions as a legitimation device, and underscore the need to reconsider the signals conveyed by sanctions rather than focusing exclusively on their economic impact – as is currently common practice. While sanctions are generally discussed as constituting a signal of support to the opposition (Nossal 1989), our results suggest that under certain conditions they actually trigger a ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect and support the governing authoritarian regime instead. Therefore, more fine-grained research is needed on how comprehensive and targeted sanctions are perceived by members of the authoritarian elite and by the broader population so as to discover the symbolic dimensions of sanctions.

Our results also demonstrate that distinguishing claims to legitimacy is a promising route to further differentiate authoritarian regimes’ varying abilities and strategies to withstand pressure from the outside. This goes beyond the established sub-differentiations based on the institutional characteristics of these regimes (Brooks 2002). Most fundamentally, a majority of regimes that blend strong claims to legitimacy and soft repression, are – following Wahman et al. (2013) – ‘limited multiparty regimes’. These electoral authoritarian regimes, where the ruling elite is constrained by the existence of some form of elections and opposition parties, combine claims to legitimacy and use soft repression – rather than overt force – to control their citizens. These results demonstrate that systematically analysing the effects of claims to legitimacy is a promising route for future research on sanctions and authoritarian regimes.

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Supporting information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web-site:

Appendix A. Episodes and calibration of outcome and conditions
Appendix B. Truth table
Appendix C. Bar plots visualizing the distribution of cases along the conditions
Appendix D. Robustness checks
Appendix E. Calibration of conditions and outcome for fsQCA

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Notes

1. We use the terms ‘authoritarian’, ‘non-democratic’ and ‘autocratic’ interchangeably throughout this article.
2. Sanctions that were imposed before 1990 but remained in place afterwards are included. To make sure that the factors affecting survival are not influenced by the pre-1990 period, the conditions are calibrated accordingly (see discussion below).
3. Conditions are INUS if they form an ‘insufficient but necessary part of a combination that is itself unnecessary but sufficient for explaining the outcome’ (Mackie 1965: 246).
4. For ‘sanctions comprehensiveness’ and the three other conditions that we did not calibrate according to the direct method (‘linkage’, ‘vulnerability’ and ‘repression’), the criteria for coding the fuzzy scale are described in detail in Web Appendix E.
5. Accordingly, approximately 20 per cent of the country experts who assessed claims to legitimacy for the Regime Legitimation Expert Survey (RLES) (Dodlova et al. 2014) stated that it is impossible for them to actually determine how legitimate (i.e., accepted) the respective regime is.
6. Each country assessment is based on at least two expert estimates with a confidence level of at least 3 on a scale from 0 to 5 with 5 indicating the highest level of confidence.
7. For the distribution of cases along the conditions, see the bar plots in Web Appendix C.
8. For a discussion of true logical contradictions, see the section below.
9. In contrast, in contexts of a high linkage coexisting with low vulnerability, authoritarian regimes revert to hard repression as the primary means of stabilising their rule (fourth configuration). This configuration describes a regime that, subject to external pressure, resorts to internationally discredited ways of securing its rule, especially hard repression. See, for example, Cordesman (1999) on Iraq.
10. The last configuration, which was previously characterised by the interplay of a lack of vulnerability and strong repression, comprises one additional condition: weak claims to legitimacy.

References


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