



# PREVENTING CIVIL WAR RECURRENCE THROUGH AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION

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## **Abstract**

Civil wars do not always end neatly, often ceasefires fail, regimes collapse, and combatants retake their arms. While there are a variety of competing explanations for civil war recurrence, this paper seeks to explain the success and failure of authoritarian regime consolidation during periods of recurrent civil war, looking at the path that leads to an end to conflict rather than a return to civil war. This process of authoritarian consolidation has three steps. First, the nascent regime must form a broad winning coalition consisting of potential belligerents. Then, this coalition must be maintained through the distribution of spoils. Finally, future spoils must be signaled, which must then be followed up on in a cyclical return to the second step. This process ensures that potential belligerents are invested in the future of the new regime, discouraging civil war reignition. But, if it fails belligerent factions will have more incentive to return to arms than maintaining the peace. Two case studies explore the success of this process in the Somoza Regime of Nicaragua and its failure in the Huerta Regime of Mexico. While the process succeeded in Nicaragua for over forty years, it is an imperfect and ongoing process requiring vigilant leadership and constant maintenance, which may make it prone to failure in the long term.

**Keywords:** Civil War, Civil War Recurrence, Conflict Theory, Peace Theory, Authoritarianism, Democracy

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## **Introduction**

When civil wars end, they leave behind decimated and divided nations that may spend years or decades picking up the pieces. Divisions and violence from civil wars can take generations to mend, as previous combatants struggle to reconcile, but this difficult process of peace and reconciliation after the end of a civil war is a much more positive path than the alternative. While in some instances civil wars can be ended conclusively, others drag on for decades or reignite when ceasefires fail. These recurring civil wars can seemingly never end, with the process of reconciliation and peace never truly progressing beyond the beginning stages before a reignition of conflict. Civil wars that recur must have some factor that prevents them from concluding, differentiating them from civil wars that can come to an end. This begs the question, why do some civil wars recur, while others do not? Answering this question is vital for governments across the globe currently struggling with insurgencies. In the past, Dr. Barbara Walter has explored the process of civil war recurrence and its prevention through the building of democratic institutions. I will be looking at civil war recurrence and its relationship with authoritarian regimes, rather than democracies, and how such regimes can use coalition building and credibility mechanisms to maintain peace following a civil war and prevent civil war recurrence.

## **Literature Review**

### **Identity**

Many explanations for civil war revolve around identity cleavages, specifically ethnic divides, which are often the most salient types of divisions. Posen views ethnic conflict as a security dilemma. Ethnic groups may see other groups as threats and rivals for resources. They then seek to protect themselves by pursuing ethnic cohesion through building a strong and salient ethnic identity. They do this because a high level of ethnic cohesion allows for better organized and more dedicated militaries. However, this behavior can lead to a kind of arms race between two groups looking to defend against each other (Posen 1993, 31). Furthermore, in a conflict, there is often a first-mover advantage, where the side that begins the conflict can choose to begin at the most optimal time when the opponent is vulnerable (Ibid, 32-33). Thus, ethnic civil war is in many ways a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ethnic groups fear that other groups will attack them, so they attack first when they have an advantage, using offense as a kind of defense. While the idea of a first-mover advantage in a conflict is useful in explaining the outbreak of conflict, Posen's work is not useful



in explaining non-ethnic civil wars. Groups that are not ethnically divided may not see each other as intrinsic rivals, thus they will not seek greater cohesion to prepare militarily, meaning that the security dilemma caused by ethnic cohesion will not exist. Furthermore, since rival ethnic groups can only be eliminated through genocide, this would imply that ethnic civil wars would continuously recur until one group is wiped out due to the security dilemma.

Another explanation points to certain types of conflict being prone to repetition. If combatants are unable to decisively win, the clearest path to peace is a power-sharing agreement. However, some types of conflicts are difficult to resolve this way due to the nature of what is being fought over, and how important that is to belligerents. Kreutz views conflicts as vulnerable to this kind of repetition when “belligerents are mobilized along ethnic lines or when they are fighting for non-divisible goals rather than limited reform,” (Kreutz 2010, 248). Conflicts over identity cleavages are particularly prone to this, as identity is not always divisible. The goals of such conflicts are incompatible with power-sharing, as they explicitly exclude other belligerents. This is a sort of bargaining problem, where compromise is not possible due to a sharp divide on priorities of negotiating countries.

### **Conflict Trap**

One other possible explanation for civil war recurrence is that civil wars are conflict traps. Civil war fundamentally changes society, causing deep economic and human devastation. Conflict leads to greater social cleavages and hatred, which can push a society bitter about an old conflict towards a new conflict (Collier and Sambanis 2002, 5). The economic devastation caused by an ongoing rebellion makes resource motivated conflict more lucrative than legitimate industries in a nation and drives opportunistic individuals to join rebel groups (Ibid). As the conflict drags on, violent politics becomes normalized and economic opportunities dry up, leading to “low quality of life and barriers to political participation,” which lead to more recruitment into rebel armies (Walter 2004, 385). This is a conflict trap, with a civil war feeding itself, creating an inescapable spiral of violence, as violence becomes the most attractive opportunity for individuals to pursue. This explanation does not preclude ethnic conflict, as armed groups may form along ethnic lines, but can also explain conflicts without an ethnic component.

All these explanations lack a fundamental feature, they do not provide a true solution to civil war recurrence. If civil war is truly a conflict trap, or if factions are unable to truly make peace due to bargaining problems, then there is no escape from civil war recurrence. But, this is observably untrue, with

some cases of recurring civil wars eventually coming to lasting peace. Thus, while these factors may contribute, there needs to be a variable that allows peace to be reached, with its absence preventing peace.

### **Difficulty in Peacemaking**

Walter introduces a new explanation for civil war recurrence that fits this need, the difficulty of negotiating settlements between adversaries, and then maintaining those settlements through the construction of institutions. Negotiated settlements require belligerents to disarm and demobilize while also trusting their adversaries to do the same, which is difficult in situations of active violence. This causes "negotiations [to] fail because civil war adversaries cannot credibly promise to abide by such dangerous terms. Only when an outside enforcer steps in to guarantee the terms do commitments to disarm and share political power become believable," (Walter 1997, 336). The problem posed by the lack of trust in negotiations is a major factor in civil war recurrence, but there are alternative solutions that do not require an outside guarantor.

Walter argues that civil war recurrence can be prevented through a process of democratic consolidation, in which belligerents can engage in electoral rather than violent competition. In this scenario, there is an internal rather than external guarantor, with the institutions of a state guaranteeing cooperation. She names three primary factors for the recurrence of civil wars, saying that it tends to occur "where government elites are unaccountable to the public, where the public does not participate in political life, and where information is not transparent," (Walter 2014, 1243). However, these three challenges can be overcome through features of democratic institutionalization. Institutions provide nonviolent avenues for potential belligerents to pursue change through a government that "serve[s] the interests of a wider population," (Ibid). Institutions also "help incumbent elites credibly commit to the political terms of a peace settlement" and check power through means other than rebellion (Ibid).

Where Walter's framework fails is that it explicitly only applies to democracies. There are certainly historical instances where recurrent civil war is brought to the end by the emergence of an authoritarian state, and Walter's theory cannot explain this outcome. Without the institutions that democracies wield, authoritarian regimes should not be able to achieve lasting peace. Therefore, there must be some other factor that explains such an outcome.



## **Theory**

I seek to explain how an outcome of peace without democracy is possible by expanding on Walter's existing theory on democratic institutionalization. Though Walter's theory is largely sound within the framework of modern liberal democracy, it has a major flaw while looking at nondemocratic and authoritarian states. Walter ties civil war recurrence to the government's lack of accountability to the public, but a government doesn't need to be accountable to the public to prevent a civil war, it needs to be accountable to the potential belligerents who compose the selectorate. The selectorate is "the set of people whose endowments include the qualities or characteristics institutionally required to choose the government's leadership and necessary for gaining access to private benefits doled out by the government's leadership," (de Mesquita et al. 2003, 42). Part of the selectorate forms the winning coalition, which "endows the leadership with political power over the remaining selectorate as well as over disenfranchised members of society," (Ibid, 51). In a democratic state, the selectorate largely includes the public, but it also includes potential belligerents who may have motivations at odds with the will of the public. In periods of repeat civil war, potential belligerents make up the key portion of the selectorate that must be brought into the winning coalition, or they will resume belligerence.

I define authoritarian regimes or dictatorships as governments that derive their authority to rule from a narrow winning coalition encompassing influential elites who signal their preferences informally. In contrast, democratic regimes have wide winning coalitions that often make up the majority of society. This is not by any means a perfect definition of democracy and authoritarianism, but it will work for the purposes of this paper due to the nature of the theory. Walter's theory explicitly looks at a government accountable to the public, indicating a wide winning coalition, therefore I will be looking in instances where such a wide coalition does not exist, looking instead at regimes that rely on the support of narrow elite coalitions.

Authoritarian states do not have the same kind of institutions as democracies, but they can prevent recurrent civil wars in similar ways. Assuming a lack of an outside guarantor, authoritarian regimes must build a framework for trust and cooperation similar to the process undergone by democratic states. Authoritarian states have narrow winning coalitions, meaning that building democratic institutions that represent the will of the public is dangerous to them. Instead, they can build elite institutions. First, deliberative institutions, such as cabinets, legislatures, and councils, allow a dictator to hear the input of allies and allow greater transparency

in decision-making for groups included in the deliberative process. Critically, such institutions give the regime a chance to signal its intentions, meaning that potential belligerents are less likely to misinterpret a regime's actions as violations of power-sharing agreements (Boix and Svobik 2013, 301). These institutions can also act as a means for a regime's coalition to signal what actions they consider unacceptable, allowing the regime to avoid igniting conflict through awareness of existing red lines. Secondly, power-sharing agreements that form elite institutions set specific rules for such institutions; "the dictator's compliance with these rules constitutes a publicly observable signal of the dictator's commitment to sharing power," (Ibid).

However, these institutions are weak because there is no central authority to enforce their decisions, and elites have few options for redress if they are ignored or passed over, with their power largely dependent on their ability to threaten rebellion (Ibid, 300). Thus, authoritarian institutions lack a fundamental component of democratic institutions; potential belligerents can be given a voice and brought into a winning coalition, but the threat of a return to arms is necessary for true accountability.

Outside of formal institutions, authoritarian regimes can also be pressured by elites through audience costs. Because the selectorate decides who rules, the selectorate can choose to exercise its power and dismantle the regime's winning coalition if necessary. Therefore, authoritarian leaders suffer from audience costs, "the domestic punishment that leaders would incur for backing down from public threats, [which] are thought to increase leaders' ability to convey their preferences credibly during military crises," (Weeks 2008, 35). Though audience costs are usually associated with democracies, authoritarian regimes face them under three conditions, if "domestic actors have the means and desire to coordinate to oust the leader... [if] outsiders can observe that an audience can punish the leader; and whether the audience views backing down negatively," (Ibid, 44). Although audience costs are usually thought of in terms of international crises, potential belligerents may be able to observe such costs during a domestic crisis. Although audience costs are theoretically part of accountability mechanisms, they do not seem to play a major direct role in either case in this paper, though they may be meaningful in other cases.

Authoritarian regimes, like democracies, can bring potential belligerents into their regime's winning coalition. Furthermore, they can use institutions and audience costs to signal commitment and credibility. This allows them to mimic Walter's solutions to civil war recurrence provided by institutionalization. However, the selectorate still must be able to threaten violence to punish the government if necessary, which is what truly differentiates democracy and



authoritarianism in this regard. The implications of this difference are worth exploring, but this paper will focus on building the theoretical framework for civil war recurrence under authoritarianism rather than contrasting it with democracy.

I hypothesize that if an authoritarian regime builds and maintains a broad winning coalition then civil war recurrence can be prevented, but failure to maintain that coalition may incite previous belligerents to return to war. Preventing civil war recurrence through this framework, which I call authoritarian consolidation, has three steps. First, a broad winning coalition inclusive of potential belligerents within the selectorate must be established. This occurs largely through informal elite negotiation and the promise of concessions. Then, this coalition must be maintained by distributing adequate influence to affect policy to the winning coalition. In most cases within authoritarian regimes, the policy being influenced is the distribution of wealth among a small clique of elites within the winning coalition. Finally, the regime must be able to signal credibility and commitment to distributing influence. Signaling a commitment to distribute influence allows the building of some level of trust between the regime and its winning coalition by committing the regime to the agreed-upon path. Without signaling, members of the winning coalition cannot know if the regime plans on keeping its promises. Distribution and signaling are cyclical; maintaining a winning coalition requires the distribution of goods alongside promises of future spoils, thus ensuring that key coalition members remain loyal until their next bribe. These steps are an ongoing process, a coalition cannot be maintained if it cannot be initially built, and signaling future actions will be of little value if elites are ignored in the present, and once wealth is distributed, the next bribe must be signaled to ensure that the coalition has reason to stay with the regime. Furthermore, society is not static and so coalitions are not static. Therefore, in some cases the coalition's composition must be altered, bringing in rising classes and ejecting declining ones, in order to maintain control over the rest of society.

An important contrast between authoritarian consolidation and the selectorate theory of de Mesquita is the necessity of broad coalitions during processes of civil war recurrence. It is usually in the interest of the regime to keep the winning coalition as small as possible, as a smaller coalition means that wealth is distributed among fewer members of the coalition, hence there is more wealth for everyone in the coalition (de Mesquita et al. 2003, 225). However, during instances of civil war recurrence, there are inherently multiple armed groups within a state capable of contesting one another. It only takes one of those groups choosing to move against the regime to return the

state to civil war. Therefore, the coalition must be broad and inclusive to prevent any of the remaining factions from choosing to rebel. The need for a broad coalition is in tension with selectorate theory's requirement for a narrow coalition, which creates a difficult incentive structure for regimes and members of the selectorate. Ultimately, the regime must be able to build an inclusive coalition, but purging opposition is also part of coalition-building, narrowing the selectorate so a coalition may be built.

### **Research Design and Case Selection**

I will be conducting a small-n qualitative comparative case study largely because my hypothesis relies on the formation of informal coalitions, which are difficult to measure quantitatively. Qualitative analysis allows me to look in-depth into the success or failure of cases of authoritarian consolidation, and how that impacted civil war recurrence.

I will be looking at two cases, the Victoriano Huerta regime in Mexico and the Anastasio Somoza Garcia regime in Nicaragua. These are most similar case studies as both were Latin American autocrats who assumed power via military coups during or following a civil war ruling divided states with multiple potential belligerent groups. Neither has a significant ethnic component. The Huerta regime assumed power during the Mexican Revolution in 1913, backed by a broad coalition of liberals dissatisfied with the incumbent Madero government and conservatives hoping to restore the Porfiriato regime. However, Huerta's coalition collapsed as he reneged on promises to elites, ruling violently and autocratically (Knight 1986b, 63-64). Similarly, Somoza assumed power in 1936 with the backing of the Liberal Party and some Conservative Party-aligned elites, following twenty-seven years of recurring civil war between the factions (Clark 1992, 22). Unlike Huerta, Somoza's winning coalition endured for decades. I have chosen these cases because they provide a clear contrast between a fledgling authoritarian regime that succeeded in establishing itself, with one that collapsed quickly.

This case selection controls for major alternative explanations. First, both cases can be considered part of a conflict trap. When Huerta seized power, Mexico was in the midst of its revolution and the government that preceded the Huerta regime was engaged in an active civil war against various insurgencies. The situation with the Somoza regime was a bit more complicated, given that the last civil war ended around two years before Somoza's coup. However, Somoza's seizure of power was relatively gradual, beginning before the civil war ended. Two years is not enough time to rebuild from a nearly eight-year conflict during a period in which four civil wars occurred in twenty-seven years. Thus, many of the elements of a conflict trap apply to Nicaragua during the inception of the Somoza regime.



Despite these similarities, there are variations between the cases worth noting. Primarily, the United States could intervene during the Mexican Revolution, which it did with the occupation of Veracruz, but Somoza rose to power while America was crippled by the Great Depression. However, Mexico is also much larger than Nicaragua, and the United States did not have the will or capability to truly act as an outside guarantor in this case. Therefore, none of these variations impact rival explanations and so they will likely not be problematic.

There is also one overarching commonality between the two cases; both Victoriano Huerta and Anastasio Somoza were caudillos. Caudillos were a variety of personalist military rulers, similar to warlords, who relied on a strongman model of politics and vast informal networks of clientelism and patronage to maintain their rule (de Riz 2014). Caudillos extended to all levels of politics, often operating regionally or locally, so caudillo regimes common to Latin America had to both cooperate with and compete with lesser caudillos who wielded independent power bases (Ibid). By using two caudillo regimes, regime type is controlled in this research.

When individuals are described as liberal or conservative this cannot be understood in a traditional western sense. Caudillo politics was dominated by personalism rather than ideology, meaning that the line between liberal and conservative was often unclear (Rivera 2016). Objectives of different caudillos tended to be “local and concrete,” and while they sometimes fit ideological molds, those were only applied to specific local circumstances rather than national ones (Knight 1986b, 5). In general, conservatives tended to be authoritarian defenders of traditional order. Liberals tended to be anti-clerical and often sought economic and political modernization under strong and efficient states (Rivera 2016). This is a general pattern rather than a concrete rule, as caudillos often focused on concrete local concerns over concepts like national economic change (Ibid). Liberals were at times committed to the rule of law and democracy, but liberal affiliated caudillos and positivist liberal aligned intellectuals were often authoritarian (Ibid). Thus, caudillo politics is fundamentally personalist rather than ideological, partisan labels should be understood as broad political alignments, rather than as any sort of ideological commitment.

## **Case Study: Somoza Regime**

### **Historical Background :**

Nationalistic Liberal dictator Jose Zelaya ruled Nicaragua from 1893 to 1909 and was eventually overthrown by an anti-nationalist Conservative military revolt backed by the United States (Walter 1993, 10). The overthrow of Zelaya would create an era of instability, which saw four civil wars between the Liberals and Conservatives between 1909 and 1936, as well as multiple American interventions ("Nicaragua - Foreign Intervention," n.d.).

The Constitutionalist War began in 1926 when a coalition government of moderate Conservatives and Liberals under President Carlos Solorzano was overthrown in a Conservative military coup (Walter 1993, 16-17). Following a Liberal uprising, the United States would begin a new occupation, ending the initial phase of the civil war and forcing out the military government (Ibid). Unlike the previous occupation, the Liberals were divided, and while some more moderate Liberals accepted the occupation, rogue nationalist Liberal caudillo Augusto Sandino's Ejército Defensor de la Soberanía Nacional (EDSN) would wage a guerrilla war against the American occupation (Ibid, 18).

### **Coalition Formation:**

The selectorate of Nicaragua at the outset of the war had six broad factions: the radical Liberals of Sandino's EDSN, the Liberal Party, moderate Conservatives like Solorzano, radical Conservatives unwilling to work with Liberals, the United States, and the newly formed American-backed National Guard, Nicaragua's new military. Anastasio Somoza would emerge from the ranks of the Liberal caudillos, uniquely positioned to dominate the nation. Somoza served in the National Guard, earning favor with the United States and Liberal Party until he was appointed the Guard's Chief by a moderate Liberal government (Ibid, 29). The National Guard quickly became Somoza's base of power, interfering in political campaigns and repressing his domestic political rivals (Ibid, 43). Somoza's existing base of power within the National Guard played well within the personalist caudillo politics of Nicaragua, as old personal friends and other Liberals who saw Somoza as a rising political star backed him vigorously (Ibid, 42).

Finally, Conservatives who were excluded from the incumbent Liberal government and believed that the Conservative Party was unlikely to win power electorally also supported Somoza, hoping to access his patronage networks (Ibid, 42-43). Cementing this alliance of Liberals and Conservatives was a new ideology of Somocismo, a "third way" merging Nicaraguan Liberal tradition with statism and a commitment to order (Ibid, 45). Somoza's political coalition formed the



basis of the winning coalition that would govern Nicaragua following his rise to power.

Although Somoza wielded considerable political power, the existence of the EDSN was unacceptable, as its uncompromising nationalism meant that it could not be brought into the American-friendly Somocista coalition, and its force of arms was too significant to ignore. By 1933, Liberal Juan Bautista Sacasa had been elected President of Nicaragua, and the United States Marines were unable to continue the occupation of Nicaragua due to the Great Depression. With the Americans gone and a Liberal in power, Sandino was willing to negotiate peace and end his protracted guerrilla war (Ibid, 30). However, peace on Sandino's terms would be unacceptable to Somoza, who "strongly maintained the view that Sandino should now turn over all his arms and munitions," which Sandino refused to do (Lane 1934a). Sandino would tell the Nicaraguan press on February 20th, 1934 that "the United States would like to get him out of the Rio Coco region in order that the land there might fall into American hands and serve as a source of food supply in the event of a war. No indication was given as to what may have prompted him to make such a statement," (Ibid). This mention of a possible war combined with a refusal to give up his weapons would prompt action by Somoza the next day, February 21st, as the National Guard murdered Sandino and attacked the EDSN against orders from the President (Walter 1993, 33). This attack greatly shifted the balance of power in Nicaragua, as the EDSN could no longer act as a check on the National Guard. The day after Sandino was murdered, the Vice-President of Nicaragua told the American Minister to Nicaragua that he believed his "life in danger as in the event of retirement of President Sacasa he... would be the chief obstacle to Somoza's ambitions being realized," (Lane 1934b).

The Somoza coalition was not unopposed, it did face resistance from traditional Liberal and Conservative elites. Somoza was looking to be elected President in 1936, but Liberal and Conservative Party elites plotted to unite behind a single anti-Somoza presidential candidate, spurring Somoza to launch a military coup, purging anti-Somocista military units, and replacing Sacasa with a puppet until the election (Walter 1993, 50-51). A coalition of anti-Somoza Liberals and Conservatives supported a unity ticket against Somoza in 1936, but it was a fruitless effort and he was swept into power (Ibid, 58). Following his election, Somoza continued to institute oppressive measures against political rivals, using military courts against dissidents, placing restrictions on political party formation, and using political spies (Ibid, 112). The Somoza regime would keep opposition deeply repressed and divided.

### **Coalition Maintenance:**

Somoza used the distribution of spoils through a vast patronage network to maintain his coalition. Jobs within the government were highly paid, and only available to Liberal Somocistas, who formed an influential pro-Somoza bloc (Ibid, 90). Similarly, he appointed National Guard officers to influential positions (Ibid, 81). Somocista control of Nicaragua's national bank also ensured Somoza's control over the availability of loans and enabled him to give favorable terms to his allies (Ibid, 77-78). He also made great efforts to maintain and strengthen his coalition by bringing in previously dissident Liberals. Political exiles were invited back to Nicaragua, and Somoza attempted to reunify the now divided Liberal Party around him (Ibid, 94-95). Coalition maintenance also included the distribution of spoils, which Somoza did with an open hand, holding parades with political officials and providing free transportation and food to common people (Ibid, 95). By parading with officials, Somoza tied them to him politically and ensured those officials would benefit from the goodwill and support built by his generous handouts.

With these changes also came a tightening of control over his coalition, as Somoza centralized Liberal party committee assignments, which now would be centrally appointed rather than elected. These Somocista party committees were in charge of distributing patronage to Somoza allies and party members (Ibid, 97). This was a key tool for coalition maintenance, allowing Somoza greater control of the distribution of spoils. Somoza's Conservative allies, the National Conservatives, were similarly "completely subordinate to Somoza and his political line," (Ibid, 99). Of the remaining Conservatives, Somoza kept them divided by cooperating with them, splitting the party between the Genuinos, Conservatives willing to work with the Somocistas to gain access to the spoils of rule, and Chamorristas, who were more hardline anti-Somoza (Ibid). Somoza transformed the Nicaraguan state and Liberal Party into a patronage network and political machine, a powerful tool of coalition maintenance while keeping Conservative opposition divided and unable to put up an anti-Somoza united front.

Nicaragua in the 1930s was a society going through massive change, and the initial Somocista coalition of Liberals and Conservatives would not do in an urbanizing and industrializing republic. Thus, Somoza expanded his coalition to include both labor and business, balancing between the two with limited labor reform, enough to please organized labor but avoiding radical change that would be unacceptable to the business community (Ibid, 101). As Latin America's urban population swelled, it brought a great political change in countries like Guatemala, where an urban revolution overthrew a military regime, but no such change was seen in Nicaragua, where Somoza had brought the rising classes into his winning



coalition.

### **Signaling and Institutionalization:**

The Somoza regime in many ways appeared personalist from the outside, but internally Somoza used institutions to govern, seeking to form consensus rather than unilaterally implementing his will (Ibid, 240). A small number of anti-Somoza Conservatives in the legislature were tolerated, and while they held little power, they did receive some representation (Ibid, 92). Somoza would replace the previous Nicaraguan constitution with one in his image in 1939, continuing the trend of institutionalization and ensuring that a legislature remained in place, albeit an authoritarian and toothless one (Constituent Assembly 1939). The existence of these institutions provided a platform for elite negotiation and signaling within Nicaragua. By continuing to strive for consensus through institutions like the legislature, Somoza signaled that he was committed to his coalition and intended to continue his patronage relationship with it.

The institutions defined by the Somoza constitution created a path for Somoza to signal to both allies and enemies his intentions. While direct promises of appointments and spoils were important tools, the real utility of these institutions can be seen in the crisis of 1944. Somoza aimed to be reelected in 1947, which would be unconstitutional, so he proposed a constitutional amendment to the Constituent Assembly that would allow him to do so (Walter 1993, 130).

However, the Liberal Party was hesitant to accept this. Prominent members spoke out and were then jailed for their troublemaking. After this, Liberals within the Constituent Assembly unanimously called for Somoza to release the imprisoned, which he acquiesced to (Ibid). The Constituent Assembly had become essentially a ground for negotiation, with Somoza signaling his intentions, and the Constituent Assembly signaling that his coalition refused to accept heavy-handed tactics against the protestors, while the prominent Liberals who were arrested signaled that parts of his coalition were unhappy with his reelection. Somoza listened to the signals of his coalition and responded softly to protests against the amendment and eventually vetoed the amendment altogether (Ibid, 131-133). Somoza's institutions allowed him to communicate with his coalition and avoid taking actions that would reopen the door to civil war, although it forced Somoza to back down.

Somoza aimed to shore up his coalition, so he could continue wielding influence after the election. Between the 1944 crisis and the 1947 election, Somoza strengthened his coalition by building goodwill with opposition

Conservatives and giving concessions to the labor movement, working to "recreate the consensus of the previous decade," (Ibid, 162). Somoza would keep his word in 1947, and formerly dissident Liberal Leonardo Arguello was nominated with his approval. Arguello had been a member of the opposition in the 1944 crisis and ran as a unity candidate between the Somocistas and Somoza-skeptical Liberals (Ibid, 153). Arguello was intended by Somoza to be a puppet, but instead acted independently, trying to undermine the power of the Somocista National Guard, and appointing people to influential positions without Somoza's approval (Ibid, 159-160). Somoza would come to Arguello after his inauguration to "intimidate him by a display of military force," but Arguello would resist his demands (Bernbaum 1947a).

Arguello would attempt to remove Somoza as the Chief of the National Guard as it became clear that Somoza intended to continue wielding influence, but a swift coup by the National Guard removed Arguello, returning Somoza to power (Bernbaum 1947b, 1947c). After the coup, it was clear that Somoza's attempts to shore up his coalition had succeeded, as the National Assembly affirmed Arguello's overthrow and re-embraced Somoza (Bernbaum 1947d). Somoza's institutional apparatus allowed him to signal his intentions to his allies, who responded with their own signaling in regards to their own opinions. Somoza listened to this information and backed down at first, aware of the weakness of his position. Then, Somoza worked to rebuild his coalition's strength before seizing power once again, this time with approval from his coalition. This reflects the toothlessness of authoritarian institutions, where institutions cannot hold the government accountable and are instead reliant on a willingness by the regime to listen to them. The outcome of Somoza's coup d'état and rise to power was a regime that lasted for over a generation through the use of patronage and signaling mechanics to complete the process of authoritarian consolidation and maintain a broad winning coalition, ending decades of recurrent civil war in Nicaragua.

## **Case Study: Huerta Regime**

### **Historical Background**

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 as a revolt against long-time dictator Porfirio Diaz to install liberal Francisco Madero as President. The original revolt was composed of a diverse array of dissident groups, such as idealistic liberals aiming to establish a democracy, peasants seeking land reform, and anti-Diaz caudillos seeking personal gain ("Mexican Revolution," n.d.). The revolution proved initially successful, with Diaz being forced to flee the country. As Diaz left, he famously said "Madero has unleashed a tiger, let us see if he can control it,"



predicting that Madero would be unable to keep Mexico at peace (Duncan 2018a). Diaz's prediction proved correct, as the diverse interest groups in Mexico had competing demands, leading to previous allies becoming enemies in a new phase of the civil war.

### **Coalition Formation**

President Madero was ill-equipped to govern the revolutionary state and unable to control the tiger. He immediately felt the weight of the Presidency, being forced to make difficult decisions on which factions to work with and which to reject, trying to thread a middle ground between the old Porfirian elite and his liberal allies, but in doing so alienating both. His former revolutionary allies Pascual Orozco and Emiliano Zapata turned against him as he failed to meet their demands. Orozco was denied a prestigious appointment while Zapata was denied extensive land reform (Duncan 2018b). These challenges from the left were met with similar ones on the right, with an uprising by former Porfirian General Bernardo Reyes, and a revolt in Veracruz by Felix Diaz, a relative of Porfirio Diaz (Knight 1986a, 253, 474). Madero relied increasingly on General Victoriano Huerta against these rebels, and Huerta proved decisive in the war against Orozco, though Huerta held presidential ambitions of his own (Duncan 2018d). While Madero was able initially to keep the revolts suppressed, the pressure the regime faced inspired a belief that he was too weak to govern Mexico in the long term, particularly among some within the military (Duncan 2018c). Unlike the Somoza coalition, the anti-Madero coalition, composed of Orozquistas, Zapatistas, Reyistas, Felicistas, and Huertistas was not a unified force, but a motley array of dissidents unhappy with Madero that had more or less assembled itself among those who felt excluded.

The Reyistas and Felicistas would launch a counter-revolutionary military coup against Madero known as the Ten Tragic Days. Initially, the coup went wrong as Reyes was killed and the coup's forces were put under siege (Duncan 2018d). Luckily for the coup plotters, General Victoriano Huerta was in charge of fighting off the coup but instead moved against Madero, arresting and killing him (Ibid). After the counter-revolutionary victory, the leaders of the coup drafted a power-sharing agreement, which made Huerta Provisional President but also created a diverse cabinet of other counter-revolutionaries, including Bernardo Reyes's son (Huerta et al. 1913). Implied within this agreement was that after new elections were held Huerta would step down and Felix Diaz would become President (Knight 1986b, 64). Although Huerta was not the initiator of the coup, he found himself the main beneficiary as the new President, leading a new counter-revolutionary winning coalition.

## Coalition Maintenance

Though Huerta came to power backed by a broad coalition, he would prove unable to maintain it as it broke apart. First and foremost, his seizure of power was supported by Mexico's elite, but seen as illegitimate by the lower classes. The peasantry was usually excluded from the selectorate, but during the Mexican Revolution peasant military leaders like Emiliano Zapata had the force of arms to challenge the government (Ibid, 2). While Somoza spent two years between the purge of Sandino and his coup laying a groundwork of support and building patronage networks, Huerta had comparatively stumbled into power. Somoza's coup was in many ways a way of unifying the country, creating a new cross-cutting coalition that included Liberals and Conservatives, but Huerta's coup had polarized Mexico further than it had already been and radicalized much of the nation against him (Ibid, 3).

Huerta would find himself unable to maintain or expand his initial coalition. Huerta attempted to offer amnesty to active rebels and succeeded in winning the support of the Orozquistas in exchange for a large bribe (Ibid, 4). The Zapatistas had initially sworn to fight under the banner of Pascual Orozco in their Plan of Ayala (Zapata 1911). However, Zapata had fought a brutal guerrilla war against Huerta and had no desire to cooperate with him (Knight 1986b, 5, 8). After it became clear that Zapata intended to continue fighting, Huerta drunkenly asked representatives from Chile and the United Kingdom for "eighteen centavos to buy a rope to kill Zapata," during a party, slurring and incomprehensible to the representatives (Ibid, 9). This was more than a poorly told joke, it would reflect the arbitrary and cruel nature of the Huerta regime, as well as his own inability to govern effectively.

Huerta's brutal rule would undermine any chance he had at providing stability. Huerta murdered Madero and his allies shortly after the coup, rather than sending them into exile as promised (Duncan 2018d). Similarly, Huerta would also have the Maderista Governor of Chihuahua arrested and murdered (Knight 1986b, 11). But rather than suppressing anti-Huertistas, this heavy-handed approach "proved wantonly provocative," alienating potential allies (Ibid, 14). Maderista Governor of Coahuila Venustiano Carranza had initially declared resistance against Huerta (Carranza 1913). Despite this declaration, in the days following the coup Carranza backtracked and indicated to the American consul he intended to comply with Huerta (Holland 1913). However, the murder of Madero changed Carranza's stance, causing him to ignite the Constitutionalist revolt (Knight 1986b, 15). Huerta's attempts at repression only spurred the northern states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Sonora to rise in rebellion, when they could have potentially solidified his coalition (Ibid, 11).



One of the strongest contrasts between Somoza and Huerta was the role of the military. While Somoza was the Chief of the National Guard and made use of his guardsmen for political ends, the Somoza regime favored political solutions and negotiation over raw coercion. On the other hand, “the consistent thread which ran through the Huerta regime, from start to finish, was militarization,” (Ibid, 62). Military solutions of all kinds were favored by Huerta, and his appointees tended to be military officers, rather than civilian allies (Ibid, 63). Unlike the broad array of interest groups included in the Somocista political machine, the Huerta government was a government by the Federal Army. Huerta would go on to betray his original Felicista allies outright. Huerta had no plans of actually giving up power as agreed to and pushed the Felicistas out of government (Ibid, 64-65). Felix Diaz did not join the Constitutionals, but moved into exile, leaving Huerta to his fate as revolution swept Mexico once again (Ibid, 76-78).

After his rise, Huerta alienated many of his former allies as his winning coalition collapsed. Huerta made no real attempt to maintain the initial coalition that brought him into power. His betrayal of the Felicistas and heavy-handed repression of Maderistas only created more enemies for himself. Instead of building patronage networks and expanding his coalition like Somoza, the only coalition Huerta built would be the anti-Huerta Constitutionals.

### **Failure of Signaling and Institutionalization:**

Tied into Huerta’s failure to maintain the winning coalition was also a failure of signaling. The Somocista institutions gave the Nicaraguan winning coalition a mechanism to express their preferences, and while Somoza was in no way bound to the expression of Nicaragua’s institutions, they acted as a way for the regime and its backers to communicate and signal a commitment to each other. Huerta did have access to similar institutions, such as Mexico’s legislature and his cabinet. Yet he more or less ignored his cabinet, instead preferring to rule autocratically, leaving the important advice and concerns of his allies unheard, until eventually he ran out of allies to ignore (Ibid, 64). Similarly, while Mexico’s Maderista-dominated legislature had initially recognized Huerta’s Presidency, when it voiced disapproval Huerta, in sharp contrast to when Somoza heeded his legislature’s calls to free arrested citizens, responded with repression, arresting or murdering many deputies (Ibid, 75). Instead of using the legislature and cabinet to signal a commitment to power-sharing, Huerta only showed his hand as a dangerous autocrat.

One final point of speculation on the fate of Victoriano Huerta is the role of audience costs in his regime. There is little information available about the internal dynamics of the Mexican Federal Army during the Huerta regime, but

it is conceivable that Huerta faced a kind of audience cost from the army's elite. Huerta's repression may not have been entirely his decision, but the result of an authoritarian military culture and an audience of officers that expected it, though it is difficult to say with certainty.

The Huerta regime, like the Somoza regime, came to power riding the wave of a civil war by working with various belligerents and forming a diverse winning coalition. However, Huerta fundamentally failed at maintaining or expanding the coalition that brought him to power, refusing to distribute power and influence. Thus, those that overthrew Porfirio Diaz simply picked up their rifles and overthrew another dictator, in a repeat of the last civil war.

## **Conclusion**

My theory holds in both of these cases. The Somoza regime followed the process of authoritarian consolidation exactly, beginning by building a broad and cross-cutting coalition of Liberals and Conservatives, maintaining that coalition through the distribution of spoils, and using institutions to signal a commitment to continued patronage. In contrast, the Huerta regime largely stumbled into power with the support of the anti-Madero bloc then failed to consolidate that alliance into a true winning coalition, building an autocratic military regime that drove away potential allies through its brutality and lack of commitment to power-sharing. The biggest takeaway from this paper is that civil war recurrence can be prevented in both democratic and authoritarian frameworks. The fundamental key is accountability to potential belligerents, in one case achieved through the rule of law and powerful institutions, and the other through patronage networks and elite signaling. Applying Walter's theory to informal authoritarian consolidation can reveal how democratic and authoritarian regimes use different mechanisms to produce similar outcomes.

Although this research can be interpreted to suggest that authoritarian consolidation is a preferable path to stability in cases of recurrent civil war, this is not necessarily the case. More research into the likelihood of civil war recurrence under conditions of democratic or authoritarian consolidation is necessary to truly determine which is more effective. While there are clear weaknesses with the democratic institutional model, namely the difficulty of building functioning independent institutions, there is reason to believe that such a model may be more effective in the long term than authoritarian consolidation. The weakness of this model is apparent in looking at both the struggles of the Somoza regime and the circumstances that brought down Huerta. In Walter's democratic institutional model, independent institutions hold actors accountable. In the authoritarian consolidation model, fundamentally the only thing that can hold actors accountable



is the threat of a return to civil war. Somoza did not listen to his winning coalition because of institutional restraints, he listened to them because they could reignite civil war and overthrow him. Had Somoza misinterpreted the signals of his coalition, particularly in the case of the 1944 crisis, he may have met the same fate as Huerta, and Nicaragua would have descended back into civil war.

The necessity of the threat of political violence does not make for a stable long term political system. The next step in analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of democratic and authoritarian consolidation would be to compare the long term outcomes of civil wars that end in democratic and authoritarian consolidation, to see if one proves meaningfully more stable than the other over many years. It cannot be forgotten that the Somoza regime would fall to civil war, a war against rebels that named themselves after Sandino. While this was not a recurrence of a previous civil war as the Sandinistas represented a new Marxist force rather than the old Liberal-Conservative split, it shows that the model of authoritarian consolidation is not necessarily the most stable long term. Authoritarian consolidation is not a process with a clear end, and while Somoza would successfully manage Nicaragua's selectorate, his sons would fail at that task. It must be remembered that dictators die while institutions do not.

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