Expanding the Governing Coalition:
“Unite and Rule”, Loyalist Monitoring, and the Sorcery Masonic Lodge*

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Abstract

Scholars have long believed autocrats “divide and rule” their elite; divided elites, the argument goes, are unable to conspire against the autocrat. Yet historical evidence suggests some autocrats do precisely the opposite. This chapter’s theoretical model argues an autocrat may create a compulsory elite social club if his inner circle is sufficiently large. Frequent interaction between the inner circle and less trustworthy elite enables the loyalists to learn about – and thus prevent – nascent conspiracies. By reducing the probability of coups d’état from less trustworthy elites, “unite and rule” monitoring enable the autocrat to expand his governing coalition. Sassou Nguesso’s compulsory elite social club takes the form of a Freemasonry lodge, created just before he seized power in 1997. After providing statistical evidence that high level appointment is the best predictor of lodge membership, the chapter employs a matching estimator to establish that lodge membership causes elites to engage in less anti-regime behavior.

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1 Introduction

When Denis Sassou Nguesso decamped to Paris after his humiliating electoral defeat in 1992, most observers of Congolese politics thought nothing of it; Sassou Nguesso was simply another deposed African autocrat fleeing to Paris, far from his long-suffering, angry compatriots. And Sassou Nguesso, like other autocrats, had much to look forward to in retirement. His years in power provided him with a Parisian patrimony befitting an 18th century European monarch, the crown jewel of which was a $25 million mansion in the eighth arrondissement, steps from the Elysée Palace, official residence of the French president. He would vacation in Nice, where his eldest daughter Edith, first lady of Gabon since 1991, owned overlooking the Mediterranean coast.

But Sassou Nguesso was too ambitious to retire. At 50 years old, perhaps he was also too young. In retrospect, his intention to reclaim the Congolese presidency was obvious. He maintained a personal “embassy” on the Avenue Montaigne in the eighth arrondissement, two blocks south of the Elysée Palace. The office boasted an oil representative, a diplomatic representative, a military attaché, and a bevy of assistants. Sassou Nguesso also set about training and arming his personal Cobra militia, short for Combattants de Brazzaville; President Jacques Chirac, freshly elected in 1995, facilitated the weapons purchases. And since his return would require provoking a civil war, Sassou Nguesso needed a talented propaganda officer to forestall international and domestic criticism. Chirac’s advisors recommended a longtime French journalist with flexible scruples, Jean Paul Pigasse, who in 1997 founded what would become Les Dépêches de Brazzaville, “Dispatches from Brazzaville.” Congo’s only daily newspaper, Les Dépêches’s influence far outstrips the typical autocratic mouthpiece. A sample of Pigasse’s journalism, published after a Paris court ruled in June 2007 that Sassou Nguesso’s properties in France were “inconsistent” with his official salary:

The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that ceaselessly attack African leaders are but the docile, servile, and occult instruments of Western governments, whose only goal is to enslave Africa once again. . . . At the center of this drama are NGOs – Transparency International, Survie, Sherpa, and Global Witness – who have aimed, for years and by any means necessary, to destabilize the two Congos, Gabon, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Sudan, Central African Republic, and Chad.

The final signal of Sassou Nguesso’s intentions was more furtive. In 1995 he decided to found his very own freemasonry lodge. It was a curious decision, of course, since Sassou Nguesso was not

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1Denis Sassou Nguesso has ruled the Republic of Congo between 1979 and 1992, and again since winning the 1997 civil war; he first took power in a 1979 coup d’état, lost sovereignty to the 1991 National Conference, and was then handily defeated in the 1992 presidential election, the first in the country’s history. This paper represents one chapter of my dissertation, which explains variation in coalition management processes in autocracies – recruitment, parallel governments, compulsory social networks, opposition alliances, elite tenure, and others – through a micro empirical analysis of Sassou Nguesso’s Congo.

2All would become influential figures upon Sassou Nguesso’s return following the 1997 civil war.

3See Verschave (2000) for more.

a freemason. Fortunately for Sassou Nguesso, he enjoyed a political alliance with fellow autocrat Abdou Diouf, who ruled Senegal from 1980 until 2000 and was a Master Mason in Dakar’s Grande Lodge de France; Omar Bongo, President of Gabon and Sassou Nguesso’s son-in-law, was also a freemason. By October 1997, when Sassou Nguesso claimed victory in the Congolese civil war and thus the presidency as well, Sassou Nguesso had ascended, with remarkably alacrity, to Master Mason. The first initiates in his new Grande Loge du Congo (GLC) were his closest political allies. Each would later occupy a central role in Brazzaville’s new government: Jean Dominique Okemba, Sassou Nguesso’s nephew and chief of presidential security; Jean Francois Ndengué, chief of the national police force and later accused of war crimes; Hugues Ngoulondélé, Sassou Nguesso’s son-in-law and Brazzaville’s mayor since 2003; and Gilbert Mokoki, commander of the ground army until 2002 and then the national gendarmerie.

The political significance of the GLC remains among Brazzaville’s worst kept secrets. One diplomat described freemasonry as the “holy grail” of Congolese politics: Understanding Congolese politics requires understanding Congolese freemasonry. Congolese citizens also emphasize its political relevance. To access elite circles, they say, “il faut s’initier,” one simply must initiate. Even the francophone press has taken notice. One recent magazine decried the “damage inflicted by Congolese freemasonry”: So important is the GLC to Sassou Nguesso’s political survival, they stated, that it is directly responsible for the country’s economic destitution. The Brazzaville government regards such accusations as unacceptable; for Congolese citizens, at least, they warrant a visit from the ngungi, the government’s quasi-secret police, or perhaps a cautionary nighttime phone call. The recent magazine article was published under a pseudonym: le petit fils du defunt roi téké de M’Baya, grandson of the late téké king from the village of M’Baya.

That freemasonry could “damage” Congolese society at first seems puzzling. Masonic lodges, after all, are ostensibly fraternal organizations, fostering camaraderie among members. Yet perhaps even more puzzling is Sassou Nguesso’s apparent willingness to create dense social ties among elites. For most students of autocratic politics believe repeated interaction fosters trust among elites, and ultimately coup d’État conspiracies. Hence the “divide and rule” strategy, summarized by Gordon Tullock:

The dictator must prevent subversive coalitions from forming…. In essence, he has

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5Bongo’s Grande Loge du Gabon long provided a forum where Gabonese elites negotiated lower prices for Elf, the French oil company, in exchange for financial payments.

6Of the four English language books on Congolese politics, only Knight (2007) and Shaxson (2007) even mention the term; both note only that Sassou Nguesso and Pascal Lissouba, who won the country’s lone fair presidential election, are freemasons. The other two to which I refer are Clark (2008) and Ghazvinian (2007).

7Although I have a copy of the article, I do not know the title of the magazine that published it. Like much of my research, this too has a story: This article was given to me by an elderly Congolese man who was among Sassou Nguesso’s drinking buddies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A southerner, this man now detests the Sassou Nguesso government. He keeps the article as evidence of Sassou Nguesso’s malfeasance; he stores it with his most valuable positions, for he fears that Congolese authorities, if they found it, would incarcerate him. At some point I hope to locate the author among the Congolese expatriate community in Paris.
to interrupt communication among potential conspirators by making communications
dangerous. . . . The dictator should practice what Mussolini called “changing of the
guard”; i.e., he should move his high officials around so that they never develop a firm
personal following in whatever job they hold (Tullock 2005). 

It is taken as axiomatic that autocrats prevent trust by rotating elites among government portfolios
or between the public and private sectors; lacking trust, elites are unable to conspire against the
autocrat. And there appears to be some evidence for this view. Joseph Mobutu, who ruled Zaire
from 1965 until 1997, sustained his power in part by shuffling elites in and out of government:

The frequent cabinet shuffles and transfers of officials from region to region . . . may be
explained as largely reflections of the president’s skill at using people while they can
provide assistance to him and at the same time keeping factions separated from each
other, thus preventing autonomous power centers from developing (Gould 1980).

Rafael Trujillo and the Somozas employed a similar “divide and rule” strategy in the Dominican
Republic and Nicaragua, respectively (Crassweller 1966, Chehabi and Linz 1998).

In contrast, this chapter’s central argument is that Sassou Nguesso’s freemasonry lodge serves as
a collective monitoring device, which deters conspiracies by forcing potentially dangerous elites to
interact with regime loyalists, thus increasing the probability regime loyalists learn of conspiracies
in their initial stages. For notwithstanding the care with which Sassou Nguesso recruits elites into
his governing coalition, he is far too savvy to let elites, once recruited, go unmonitored. Indeed,
Sassou Nguesso knows both how common and how dangerous elite betrayal is: His 1991 removal
was due to a series of political betrayals, the most painful coming from Emmanuel Nguélondélé,
father-in-law to both daughter Ninelle and nephew Edgard. He can also consider the fates of his
neighbors. To the west, on August 3, 1979, almost six months to the day after Sassou Nguesso
first seized power, Francisco Macias Nguema, the ruler of Equatorial Guinea, was deposed by his
nephew, Teodoro Obiang Nguema. Macias’s fate: execution by a Moroccan firing squad. To the
east, Laurent Kabila was greeted as a savior when he overthrew Mobutu Sese Seko in May 1997;
Kabila was assassinated by bodyguards less than four years later. To the north, in the Central
African Republic, Francois Bozizé deposed Ange-Félix Patassé in March 2003; Bozizé formerly
served Patassé as army chief of staff.

The “unite and rule” strategy documented and explained in this chapter – that is, Sassou
Nguesso’s efforts to cultivate dense social ties among elites – is more common in autocracies than the
traditional emphasis on “divide and rule” would suggest. Alfredo Stroessner ruled Paraguay from
1954 until 1989, a remarkable 34 years. His military and ministerial elite enjoyed unusually long
tenures and were culled from his close personal friends; they knew each other well and interacted
frequently (Lewis 1980). Trujillo hosted a weekly Sunday lunch at his personal residence, to which

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8 For similar statements, see Lewis (1978) and Lewis (1972).
20 or 30 of his aides were invited; the six hour affair was fraught with tension, as guests consciously avoided saying something that could later be used against them. Each of these autocrats enjoyed an exceptionally long tenure, and each ruled their elite, in part, by forcing dense social ties.

To explain the origins and implementation of this “unite and rule” strategy, this chapter presents a game theoretic model of compulsory elite social clubs in autocracies. When the autocrat creates a social club, he also sets its size and membership. The model yields three central results. First, the social club forces members of the elite into a separating equilibrium. By letting members of the elite self-select into the social club, the autocrat identifies those who voluntarily accept more intensive monitoring; members of the elite who remain outside the social club do so precisely to avoid more intensive monitoring. Second, by expanding the set of elite loyalists, the autocrat reduces the number of disloyalists and hence the probability of a coup; since the expected utility from remaining outside the government is lower, elite loyalty is less costly to purchase. Finally, the autocrat forms a larger social club as his discretionary income rises, since political power is more valuable.

In substantiating its theoretical account, this chapter confronts three inferential challenges. First, no GLC initiate would dare discuss the Lodge’s activities with a non-initiate. Consequently, Congolese elites with direct knowledge of the “causal mechanism” posited by the model are unwilling to discuss it openly. Second, the benefits of effective monitoring are, by definition, unobservable. Insofar as monitoring is an effective deterrent, the autocrat need never inflict the punishments that betrayal would occasion. In the lexicon of game theory, betrayal and punishment lie “off the equilibrium path.” Finally, since GLC initiates are systematically different than their non-initiated counterparts – they are selected, after all, by Sassou Nguesso himself – attributing observed differences in initiate behavior to the GLC itself is inappropriate.

This chapter addresses these challenges through nearly two years of field research in Congo and France, home of the politically active diaspora. I rely heavily on interviews with family members of GLC initiates – siblings and cousins, most commonly – and members of the mid-level elite who refused initiation. In effect, my fieldwork yields an “analytic narrative” of the conditions that compelled social club monitoring in 1997 and the GLC’s expansion between 2001 and 2005. I then employ a series of statistical techniques to probe the determinants of elite membership in the GLC and estimate its causal effect on the probability an elite engages in anti-regime behavior. Since the treatment, GLC membership, is assigned by Sassou Nguesso according to a set of relatively well defined criteria, I employ a propensity score matching estimator, which first estimates each elite’s probability of joining the GLC; it then uses these probabilities to create roughly identical treatment and control groups, enabling identification of causal effects.

In addition to its central results, this chapter contributes to the broader literature on autocratic politics. Political scientists increasingly believe that autocrats create employ formal political institutions – legislatures and political parties – to facilitate credible commitments with their elite and
moderate elite incentives for coups d’État (Gandhi 2008; Blaydes 2008; Geddes 1999, 2008, 2009; Brownlee 2007; Svolik 2007, 2012; Gehlbach and Keefer 2011a, b). Yet the countries on which many of these accounts are based – Egypt, Mexico, and the Soviet Union, most commonly – are systematically different than those in Africa, where most autocrats inherit electoral and party institutions upon seizing power and promptly dismantle them. This chapter, and my larger dissertation, provides an account of autocratic politics in the presence of weak institutions.

This chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents a brief history of Sassou Nguesso’s freemasonry lodge: its origins in the colonial period, its 1995 founding, its activities, and its membership over time. It also documents a series of puzzles. Section 3 models an autocrat’s decision to create an elite social club; it specifies the conditions under which the club emerges, its evolution, and its membership. With the model’s insights, in Section 4 I return to Congo to understand the GLC’s founding and evolution, its membership criteria, its effect on elite behavior, and the consequences for refusing initiation. Section 5 concludes.

2 A Brief History of Congolese Freemasonry

African freemasonry is a peculiar legacy of French colonialism. On May 9, 1781, the Grande Loge de France (GLF) gave Sub-Saharan Africa its first freemasonry lodge. Located in Saint-Louis, Senegal, only the expatriate elite claimed membership: military officers, colonial bureaucrats, and affluent businessmen. As the French colonial apparatus expanded, so too did freemasonry. The capital of Afrique Equatoriale Francaise, Brazzaville received its first lodge in 1906; by 1930 freemasonry also flourished in Madagascar, Gabon, Benin, Guinea, Mali, Cameroon, and Côte d’Ivoire (Badila 2004).

Following independence in the early 1960s, lodge membership slowly expanded to the African elite; by the mid-1970s it was a thoroughly African affair. Omar Bongo, who ruled Gabon from 1967 until his death in 2009 and, though eight years his elder, in 1990 became Sassou Nguesso’s son-in-law was the first African ruler to establish his own lodge. Appearing in 1976, the Grande Loge du Gabon (GLG) assembled the indigenous political and expatriate economic elite. With Gabon’s status, at least until the 2000s, as France’s leading African oil supplier, the GLG secured bilateral commercial and political ties (Badila 2004).

Sassou Nguesso created his GLC in 1995, during his Parisian retreat. The right panel of Fig-

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9 Indeed, it remains theoretically unclear why an autocrat who is sufficiently powerful to create institutions is then unable to dissolve them, as prevailing institutionalist accounts seem to assume. In a separate paper, also my dissertation’s, introductory chapter, I show that, contrary to Gandhi (2008), no forms of autocracy are more likely to create institutions once inherited institutions are controlled for.

10 Though tangential to the story, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, the Italian explorer who claimed contemporary Congo for the French in 1880, was a mason himself.

11 A separate chapter in my dissertation will discuss marriage as a political device in Sassou Nguesso’s Congo.

12 This account is incomplete. There is apparently a more detailed account of Bongo’s GLG at a French library in Brazzaville, but I have yet to locate it. It’s not entirely central to this story, however.
Figure 1 shows the percentage of the Congolese general corps that claimed membership in Sassou Nguesso’s GLC by year; the left panel depicts the percentage of the ministerial corps; the break indicates the country’s democratic interlude, the period of Sassou Nguesso’s political exile. The GLC, clearly, started small. Its first members were Sassou Nguesso’s inner circle: family and longtime collaborators who remained loyal throughout the tumult of the early 1990s. As membership slowly expanded, however, in 1999 Sassou Nguesso created something entirely new: *une loge sorcière*, a sorcery masonic lodge. With Okemba, his favorite nephew and head of presidential security, as director and Sassou Nguesso as *président d’honneur*, the new lodge was dubbed *Elikia*, “hope” in the northern Lingala language, a clear reference to Sassou Nguesso’s 2002 electoral campaign slogan: *La nouvelle espoir*, or “the new hope,” itself ironic since Sassou Nguesso neither was new nor inspired hope.

The transition to *Elikia* marked a turning point. As Figure 1 documents, between 2001 and 2004 membership spiked. The GLC soon counted among its members virtually all of the Congolese military and ministerial elite: all those who “ate” – who had ascended the ranks of the elite class – had initiated. Sassou Nguesso apparently limited membership as well. The only uninitiated ministers are members of political parties who endorsed Sassou Nguesso during a previous electoral campaign, and whose expected tenures – the topic of the dissertation’s final substantive chapter – are likely short anyway. Likewise, the only generals excluded from the GLC are those appointed by Sassou Nguesso’s predecessors; Sassou Nguesso regards these generals as deeply untrustworthy, and hence refuses them meaningful portfolios anyway.

Although the GLC’s membership is now common knowledge in Brazzaville – and even among the Congolese diaspora in Paris – its activities are among Brazzaville’s best kept secrets. They are, as best anyone can tell, mostly quotidian. Members congregate at the Brazzaville lodge on weekday evenings, and occasionally a new set of initiates will be inducted at the *Palais du Parlement*. Sassou Nguesso attends only the initiation ceremonies, marked by pomp and a striking solemnity. Like all freemasonry lodges, the GLC provides charity to members following personal tragedies. Reflecting the affluence of the Congolese elite, these gifts rise upwards of $100,000. Like most secret societies, many Congolese citizens suggest more insidious initiation rites as well: human sacrifice or perhaps a sexual present to Sassou Nguesso, usually an initiate’s wife. In short, the activities of the lodge appear much less important than the frequent interaction membership forces.

There is, however, one exception to this banality. When Sassou Nguesso and Okemba transformed the GLC into *Elikia* – the “sorcery” masonic lodge – in 1999, they incorporated the nzobi fetish cult, on which initiates are required to swear upon entry. Nzobi is widely practiced among Cuvette regionals, and occasionally elsewhere in the north. The nzobi cult has been described this

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13 These initiation ceremonies are by invitation only; a 2007 ceremony was recorded and somehow distributed illicitly in Brazzaville.

14 This account is pieced together from interviews with a former GLC member and domestic observers of Congolese politics. I have not been able to verify these with first person accounts.
The nzobi cult intervenes during conflicts, litigations, or any situation in which one aims to find or discover the guilty party. ... Rather than resolving a dispute between two parties, the nzobi cult simply finds the guilty party and bestows upon him a mystical sanction wished by the aggrieved party.

The GLC is regarded as a deadly serious topic. Congolese citizens generally refuse to discuss it, privately or publicly, for fear of physical retribution. This prohibition extends to expatriates both in Congo and in France. Following one interview with a particularly high ranking member of Brazzaville’s catholic church – himself a mason, I soon learned, despite the Archbishop’s opposition
– I received a thinly veiled threat, demanding that I ask no further questions about the topic. And the prohibition extends to Congolese expatriates in Paris. Somewhat remarkably, there exists a history of Congolese freemasonry; it was authored by Joseph Badila, a Congolese citizen who resides mostly in Paris. The account makes virtually no mention of Sassou Nguesso’s GLC.15

The best sources of information about the GLC are often the alienated families of recent initiates, as well as colonels and one-time ministerial counselors who refused initiation. GLC membership, they invariably say, is a public signal that “you are one of them” and “you can be trusted.”16 By refusing initiation, moreover, these colonels and counselors knowingly forgo opportunities for advancement. So why do they do it? “My dignity is not for sale,” is a common response, particularly among Congolese citizens who would happily participate in an armed uprising.17 And because of the stigma attached to freemasonry in an overwhelmingly Catholic religious environment, initiates are often repudiated by their extended families, despite the initiates’ newly lavish lifestyles. Said one opposition activist after the initiation of his cousin: “We greet each other whenever we cross paths, but we will never be close again.”18

And what of the consequences for refusing an “invitation” to join? These, put simply, can be serious, especially for the resistant old guard whose decline was requisite for Sassou Nguesso’s consolidation of power. Matthias Dzon, by any measure, counts among Congo’s financial elite; he was director general of Congo’s leading bank from 1992 until 1994, minister of finance between 1997 and 2002, and national director of another leading Congolese bank between 2003 and 2009. Dzon has consistently rebuffed appeals to integrate his political party into Sassou Nguesso’s Parti Congolais du Travail (PCT); he also refused to join the GLC in the early 2000s, a move that coincided with a failed assassination attempt against him and a successful attempt against his wife. Justin Lekoundzou personifies the PCT old guard: founding member of the PCT in 1968, minister of industry in the 1970s, minister of finance throughout the 1980s, and minister of defense in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Sassou Nguesso’s efforts to dissolve the PCT between 2002 and 2006 sought squarely to marginalize Lekoundzou and comrades. In response, Lekoundzou organized a congress of PCT members opposed to the dissolution; he also refused to join the GLC. After surviving an assassination attempt in 2006, Lekoundzou and Marion Mandzimba Ewango, himself a Master Mason in another lodge, created a rival sorcery club, the Association Marien Ngouabi et Ethique, to “harness the spirit” of PCT founder Marien Ngouabi, himself a freemason, whose assassination Sassou Nguesso orchestrated during his rise to power. The Association Marien Ngouabi et Ethique is widely regarded as a “shield” against Sassou Nguesso’s GLC; Sassou Nguesso refuses to authorize its existence.

Among Africa’s most successful autocrats, Sassou Nguesso does nothing without careful calcula-

15Badila (2004)
16Interviews with Colonel PMM, 12 November 2011, and Counselor GM, 15 December 2011.
17Colonel EN, 28 July 2010.
18Interview with BM, 5 January 2011.
tion. He managed, indeed, to reclaim power by provoking a civil war, preparations for which began some three years prior to the event itself. So why, contrary to the apparent advice of most students of autocratic politics, does Sassou Nguesso “unite” his elite, providing them ample opportunity for communication and coordination? Why did membership spike between 2001 and 2004? And why does Sassou Nguesso target non-initiates for assassination? The GLC is central to Sassou Nguesso’s elite management strategy; the model below attempts to make sense of it.

3 A Theory of “Unite and Rule”

To address these questions I build a simple model of autocratic politics. Informed by my field research in Congo, it departs in two ways from existing theoretical models. First, existing models generally assume autocrats know the participation constraints of their elites – that is, what elites stand to gain from alternative autocrats – and hence give them the minimum required to secure their loyalty. Second, they assume, autocrats then assemble the smallest coalition that can somehow prevent a coup d’état from excluded elites [Acemoglu, Robinson and Verdier 2004; Pádro i Miquel 2007]. These two assumptions, however, generate a result that is often inconsistent with the empirical record: Since elites are easily bought off, coups should never actually occur.

In response, the model below conceptualizes the autocrat as confronting an informational challenge: Since elite loyalty is unobservable, the autocrat cannot know precisely how much revenue he must share with his elite to prevent a coup. And even if an autocrat assembles a robust governing coalition, a set of disgruntled elites may still mount a successful coup; conspiracies, after all, require only a few participants to succeed. Hence I treat coups as emerging probabilistically, a function of both the autocrat’s revenue sharing decision and the number of elites excluded from revenue sharing.

Chapter 3 of my dissertation explains the formation and composition of the autocrat’s inner circle. This model takes the autocrat’s inner circle as fixed, and lets him form a social club in which the inner circle interacts with potentially disloyal members of the elite. In short, the chapter explores when and how the autocrat employs his inner circle strategically.

3.1 Environment

Consider a society comprised of an autocrat, his inner circle $L$, and an elite of unit mass indexed by $i$. The $n_L$ members of the inner circle receive the regime’s most sensitive positions, share amount $b^*_L$ of state revenue $\omega$, and unwilling to engage in coups.

Since all members of the elite are initially excluded from the autocrat’s revenue sharing agreement, they actively conspire against him. I refer to this excluded group as set $K$. I assume the probability these efforts result in a successful coup is a function of the number of excluded elites
\( n_K: \)

\[
\Pr (\text{Coup}) = \beta n_K \\
= \beta (1 - n_J)
\]

(1)

The parameter \( \beta \in [0, 1] \) measures the efficiency of their conspiracies. As \( \beta \to 0 \), elites outside the network are relatively less threatening, perhaps because they are particularly weak or regionally dispersed, making cooperation more difficult.

The autocrat must then decide whether to create a governing coalition beyond his inner circle. I refer to the members of the elite included in this governing coalition as set \( J \), where \( n_J + n_K = 1 \). As members of the governing coalition, the \( n_J \) members of set \( J \) share amount \( b_J \) of state resources. They are also required to join a private social club, which includes members of the inner circle. This private social club has two effects. First, since it enables the inner circle to monitor members of set \( J \), it makes coups less attractive to members of set \( J \). Intuitively, since they are subject to monitoring by the inner circle, their participation in a coup is more likely to be detected, reducing the likelihood that they conspire. Second, since the social club enables an expanded governing coalition, the set of excluded elites is smaller still. Consequently, coup attempts from outside the governing coalition are less likely to succeed.

The chief advantage of the social club is that it enables members of the inner circle to detect coups in which set \( J \) colleagues participate in their planning stages. In particular, I assume the probability that the inner circle detects a coup in its planning stages is

\[
\Pr (D = 1) = \gamma n_L^* \]

where \( \gamma \in [0, 1] \) measures the effectiveness with which regime loyalists monitor. As \( \gamma \to 0 \), regime loyalists monitor poorly; intuitively, this may be because they are less loyal than the autocrat believes or because the other elites included in the social network already have some strong basis for trust, which facilitates their communication and renders inner circle monitoring more difficult. In short, since inner circle elites constitute the core of the social club, they have an opportunity to detect nascent coups in which social club members participate, thus modifying the expected returns from a coup among members.

This implies that members of set \( J \) governing coalition expect utility

\[
u_i (\text{Coup}|i \in J) = \frac{\Pr (D = 0) \times \Pr (\text{Coup}|n_J) \theta + \alpha_i}{n_J}.
\]

(2)

from a coup. The term \( \Pr (\text{Coup}) \in [0, 1] \) gives the probability that a coup succeeds. The parameter \( \theta \) measures the amount of state revenue \( \omega \) that an alternative autocrat will share with his elite, while the parameter \( \alpha_i \geq 0 \) reflects variation in elite \( i \)'s expected gains from an alternative autocrat.
Intuitively, some elites will do better under an alternative autocrat than others. Alternatively, $\alpha_i$ can also measure elite $i$’s loyalty to the incumbent autocrat; if $\alpha_i < 0$, elite $i$ has some positive loyalty for the autocrat, yielding reduced welfare if an alternative autocrat seizes power. If a coup fails, participants receive a payoff of 0.

Although the autocrat chooses the amount $b_L$ of state revenue $\omega$ he shares with his elite, he is uncertain how well they will do from the alternative autocrat. And since the autocrat does not know his elite’s expected gains from a coup, he cannot simply “buy them off.” I model this by assuming the autocrat does not observe $\alpha_i$; rather, he knows only its distribution across the elite population:

$$\alpha_i \sim \text{Unif} \left[ -\frac{1}{2\psi}, \frac{1}{2\psi} \right]$$

where $\psi \geq 1$ reflects the autocrat’s beliefs about the distribution of $\alpha_i$. As $\psi \to 1$ the autocrat views his elite as more heterogeneous, with some very loyal and others much less so. These assumptions correspond to our intuitions about life as an autocrat: His elite stands to gain something from removing him, but the autocrat does not know precisely how much.

The autocrat thus recruits elites into his governing coalition by sharing resources $b_J$. As the residual claimant on state resources, however, the autocrat also has an interest in minimizing the amount of revenue he lavishes on set $J$ elites. The autocrat’s utility depends on whether excluded elites are able to remove him from power:

$$u = \begin{cases} \omega - b_L^* - b_J & \text{if he retains power} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

The autocrat’s challenge, in short, is twofold. With his inner circle assembled, he must decide whether to create a private social club. And if he does, he must then decide its size. Expanding the social club expands the set of monitored elites – those whose loyalty can be induced by virtue of being monitored – and reduces the probability of a coup. Yet expansion is also costly, for by creating and expanding the social club, the autocrat must buy more members of the elite.

The timing of the game is as follows:

1. Taking the size $n_L^*$ and cost $b_L^*$ of his inner circle as fixed, the autocrat decides whether to create a social club (set $J$) and announces some amount $b_J$ of state revenue $\omega$ that members will receive upon joining.

2. Elites self-select into the social club by accepting the autocrat’s offer of $b_J$ or rejecting it.

3. A coup emerges from outside the governing coalition with probability $\beta n_K$.

4. The autocrat receives his payoff.
The solution will be a strategy profile $\sigma = \{n^*_J, b^*_J, \alpha^*_i\}$ that constitutes a subgame perfect Nash equilibrium.

3.2 Analysis

The model is solved by backwards induction. I first find the set of elites whose loyalty can be induced from inclusion in the social club. For this set of elites, using equation (2),

$$
\frac{b_J}{n_J} \geq \frac{(1 - \gamma n^*_L) \beta (1 - n_J) \theta + \alpha_i}{n_J} \quad \alpha_i \leq b_J - (1 - \gamma n^*_L) \beta (1 - n_J) \theta
$$

Equation (3) identifies the set of elites whose loyalty can be induced from inclusion in the set $J$ governing coalition. Intuitively, their $\alpha_i$ parameters are sufficiently low – either because they are sufficiently loyal to the incumbent autocrat or because they expect relatively little from an alternative autocrat – that coalition membership deters them from supporting a coup. Since the autocrat knows the population distribution of $\alpha_i$, he can determine the number of elites whose loyalty can be induced for a given amount $b_J$ of state revenue $\omega$. In particular, the number of elites for whom (3) holds for a given $b_J$ is

$$
n_J(b_J) = \int_{-\frac{1}{2\psi}}^{b_J - (1 - \gamma n^*_L) \beta (1 - n_J) \theta} \alpha di = \frac{\frac{1}{2} + \psi [b_J - \beta \theta (1 - \gamma n^*_L)]}{1 - \beta \theta \psi (1 - \gamma n^*_L)}
$$

This is illustrated graphically in Figure 2. The $x$-axis gives the distribution of $\alpha$ across elites on the interval $[-\frac{1}{2\psi}, \frac{1}{2\psi}]$; the $y$-axis gives the density $\psi$ for a given realization of $\alpha$.

From equation (4), elites with $\alpha_i$ values less than $b_J - \beta (1 - n_J) \theta$ can be made loyal from inclusion in the governing coalition. The private social club enables the autocrat to integrate a fraction of the otherwise excluded elites into the governing coalition at less cost than he would otherwise, by reducing the attractiveness of a coup to both its members and its non-members. If its members participate in a coup, they are more likely to be caught; if non-members mount a coup, it is less likely to succeed.

The autocrat finds his optimal club size by balancing his interest in reducing the set of elites who wish to overthrow him without sacrificing too many of the financial perquisites of power:

$$
\max_{b_J, n_J} \left\{ [1 - \beta (1 - n_J)] (\omega - b^*_L - b^*_J) \right\}
$$
3.3 Results

The model’s results are summarized in Proposition 1.

Proposition 1 (“Unite and Rule”). *The equilibrium outcome depends on the size of state revenue $\omega - b_L^*$.  

1. When $\omega - b_L^* \leq (1 - \beta) \left[ \frac{1}{2} \theta - (1 - \gamma n_L^*) \right]$, the equilibrium is

   $n_J^* = 0, \quad b_J^* = 0, \quad Pr(\text{Coup})^* = \beta$

2. When $\omega - b_L^* \geq \frac{1}{2} \theta - (1 - \gamma n_L^*)$, the equilibrium is

   $n_J^* = 1, \quad b_J^* = \frac{1}{2} \left[ (\omega - b_L^* + \theta (1 - \gamma n_L^*) - \frac{1}{\psi} \left( \frac{1}{\beta} - \frac{1}{2} \right) \right], \quad Pr(\text{Coup})^* = 0$

3. When $\omega - b_L^* \in \left( (1 - \beta) \left[ \frac{1}{2} \theta - (1 - \gamma n_L^*) \right], \frac{1}{2} \theta - (1 - \gamma n_L^*) \right)$, the equilibrium is

   $n_J^* = \frac{1 + \psi [\omega - b_L^* + \theta (1 - \gamma n_L^*) (1 - \beta)] - \frac{1}{\beta}}{1 - \beta \theta \psi (1 - \gamma n_L^*)}$

   $b_J^* = \frac{1}{2} \left[ (\omega - b_L^* + \theta (1 - \gamma n_L^*) - \frac{1}{\psi} \left( \frac{1}{\beta} - \frac{1}{2} \right) \right]$

   $Pr(\text{Coup})^* = \beta (1 - n_L^*)$
Elites for whom
\[ \alpha_i \leq b_J^* - \beta (1 - n_J^*) \theta \]  
join the social club voluntarily. If the autocrat can credibly threaten a tax punishment of size
\[ c = \beta \theta (1 - n_J^*) \gamma n_L^* \]  
against all non-member elites, the autocrat can compel elites for whom
\[ \alpha_i \in (b_J^* - \beta (1 - n_J) \theta, b_J^* - \beta (1 - n_J) \theta (1 - \gamma n_L^*)) \]  
to join, yielding enough self-selection to achieve the optimal \( n_J^* \) elites.\(^{19}\)

Proposition \(^{1}\) underscores the usefulness of the social club to the autocrat. After the autocrat fixes his inner circle, the social club enables him to employ their loyalty strategically. The private social club has two effects. First, once members of the elite join the club, participation in a coup becomes more dangerous, enabling the autocrat to purchase elite loyalty at less cost than he would otherwise. Second, the expanded governing coalition enabled by the social club reduces elite utility from remaining outside the governing coalition, since their coups become less likely to succeed. Hence the social club changes the relative cost to the autocrat of purchasing additional security in the form of an expanded governing coalition.

The social club also fundamentally changes the strategic environment. The social club’s self-selection mechanism forces members of the elite into a separating equilibrium: It forces members of the elite to reveal whether their \( \alpha_i \) values are below the loyalty cut point for membership. For joining the social club is a costly signal. Its members voluntarily subject themselves to more intensive monitoring than they would if they remained outside. Indeed, the only members of the elite who prefer to remain outside the social club are those who gain the most from a coup. The autocrat, in short, goes from knowing virtually nothing about elite loyalty to certainty about which members of the elite he must fear most.

Since the social club has its greatest effect on its members – the very act of membership reduces their payoffs from coups – the autocrat may want to include more elites in the social club than join voluntarily. This group consists of elites with relatively higher \( \alpha_i \) values, as defined by equation (8). Hence if the autocrat can credibly threaten a tax against all non-member elites, he can effectively increase the cost of remaining outside the social club, and hence induce more elites to join; indeed, he can induce as many elites to join as he would like. The size of this tax is defined by equation (7).

The autocrat, in short, may threaten elites to join the social club, since membership itself reduces elite payoffs from coups.

\(^{19}\)I assume \( \frac{\gamma}{\beta} > \theta (1 - \gamma n_L^*) \).
Proposition 1 makes clear predictions about the social club’s origins, evolution, and membership. The autocrat’s inner circle constitutes the core of the social club, its first members. The next additions are more hostile to the regime than the loyal inner circle, yet less hostile than the elites who remain outside. Upon initiation, these new members are granted the regime’s less sensitive positions. As Figure 3 makes clear, the autocrat’s discretionary income – the difference between state revenue $\omega$ and the amount he lavishes upon his inner circle – is a primary determinant of the social club’s size $n^*_J$. When state revenue $\omega - b^*_L$ is particularly low – corresponding to the far left region of Figure 3 – the autocrat’s returns from power are so low that he forgoes the expanded governing coalition the social club provides, preferring to accept the possibility of a coup. As state revenue $\omega - b^*_L$ increases to intermediate values, however, the autocrat forms a social club, which permits an expansion of the governing coalition to the marginal members of the elite: those who would ordinarily be regime opponents, but who can be bought off at relatively low cost. The probability of a coup declines, but the amount $b^*_J$ of state revenue the autocrat offers rises. The autocrat accepts the trade-off for the opportunity to siphon from the state treasury. Finally, when $\omega - b^*_L$ is sufficiently large – corresponding to the far right region of Figure 3 – the autocrat expands the governing coalition to include virtually the entire elite class, reducing the probability of a coup trivially low. Although this requires setting $b^*_J$ particularly high to accommodate the most potentially disloyal elites, the autocrat does so willingly, for the returns from power are so high.

The effect of the size of the autocrat’s inner circle $n^*_L$ is less intuitive. First, by rendering the social club’s monitoring mechanism more effective, a larger inner circle generates an expansion in the social club’s size. Second, by reducing the probability that they participate in a successful coup, a larger inner circle also reduces the expected utility of social club membership for new initiates, forcing the autocrat to share more state revenue to attract new members. The first effect dominates as $\gamma \to 0$ and $\beta \to 1$: that is, as the inner circle monitors less effectively and members of the elite outside the social club conspire more effectively. Social club monitoring and revenue sharing $b^*_J$ are thus substitutes: The autocrat creates the social club to render loyalty less costly.

4 Returning to Congo: Empirical Analysis

The model above developed a theory of compulsory elite social clubs in autocracies; the model is intended to illuminate Sassou Nguesso’s Grande Loge du Congo, and provide more general predictions about the structure of compulsory elite social clubs across autocracies and their effects on member behavior. To assess the model’s observable implications, I construct a dataset of Congo’s political and economic elite since Sassou Nguesso returned to power in 1997. The dataset records biographic and professional data for virtually all of Congo’s major and mid-level figures since 1997: generals, colonels, ministers and their counselors, presidential advisors, members of parliament, local and regional executives, heads of parastatals, and leaders of all major political parties. The result is
Figure 3: Proposition visualized as a function of state revenue $\omega - b^*_L$. The autocrat’s optimal governing coalition $n^*_J$ is given by the dotted line, while his optimal revenue sharing $b^*_J$ is solid.

Define $(\omega - b^*_L)' = (1 - \beta) \left[ \frac{1}{\beta \psi} - \theta (1 - \gamma n^*_L) \right]$ and $(\omega - b^*_L)'' = \frac{1}{\beta \psi} - \theta (1 - \gamma n^*_L)$, corresponding to the equilibrium cut points.

an elite-year dataset of nearly 1,200 individuals. The dataset was constructed from research at the archives of Brazzaville’s three leading newspapers – *La Semaine Africaine*, *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville*, and *Talassa* – and some 150 interviews during nearly two years of field research.

Since there is no publicly available roster of the GLC’s members, I employed three sources to construct a yearly membership roster. First, I hired a team of research assistants to position themselves outside the GLC’s main meeting lodge; over the course of several weeks in 2010, they recorded everyone who entered and exited, yielding an accurate record of the GLC’s contemporary members. To extend this membership roster to 1995, I conducted a series of interviews with Brazzaville’s most astute political observers between 2009 and 2012: local journalists, human rights advocates, former ministers and their counselors, and military officers. I then verified the annual membership roster these interviews yielded with leaked footage from a 2006 initiation ceremony,
held in Brazzaville’s *Palais du Parlement*\(^{20}\) The result is a dichotomous variable $\text{GLC}_{it}$, which assumes value 1 if elite $i$ was a member in year $t$. By 2011, according to my dataset, the GLC included some 90 initiates, just less than 10% of my full dataset of political elites.

![Figure 4: Characteristics of GLC initiates and non-initiates.](image)

Figure 4 presents descriptive statistics for GLC initiates and non-initiates; the $y$-axis records the proportion of dataset years in which GLC initiates and non-initiates exhibited the personal characteristics along the $x$-axis. My data indicate that GLC initiates were universally members of Sassou Nguesso’s PCT; only half of the non-initiates in the dataset, by contrast, are PCT members. Since the GLC was founded, Sassou Nguesso’s Mbochi co-ethnics have constituted nearly 25% of initiate-years; Mbochi ethnics are clearly a small minority of the Congolese political elite. GLC initiates, moreover, are disproportionately veterans of Sassou Nguesso’s civil war effort and

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\(^{20}\)The footage has now been posted on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5sDIWQhckk&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5sDIWQhckk&feature=related) and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WX6e2YJcyM&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WX6e2YJcyM&feature=related).
occupants of the regime’s most important portfolios. GLC initiates also engage in far less anti-regime behavior than their non-initiated counterparts. Indeed, in less than 5% of initiate-years did a GLC member engage in public or private challenges to Sassou Nguesso.

This section consists of four parts. Section 5.1 employs a brief analytic narrative to understand the origins and evolution of the GLC. In Section 5.2 I probe the determinants of GLC membership more systematically, making use of the dataset of political elites. Section 5.3 employs a matching estimator to pair elites who are similar in all respects save GLC membership, and then measures the causal effect of GLC membership on anti-regime behavior. Section 5.4 considers to what extent Sassou Nguesso attempts to punish elites who resist membership.

4.1 The Origins and Evolution of the Grande Loge du Congo

Among the most striking features of Sassou Nguesso’s GLC is its recent vintage: It was created only in 1995, as he prepared to seize Brazzaville, and not during the 1980s, when he ruled Congo as an ostensibly Marxist dictator. Why did Sassou Nguesso eschew social club monitoring in the 1980s and embrace it upon his 1997 return?

Proposition 1 suggests the answer lies in the size of his inner circle and its capacity to monitor. Sassou Nguesso seized power in 1979 as a “first among equals,” and he was as suspicious of his inherited elite as his predecessors should have been of him. His inner circle was small and, with state resources relatively limited, he had little way to expand it. Second, even if Sassou Nguesso could have secured a larger inner circle, it is unclear how effectively they would have monitored; in the context of the model, $\gamma \to 0$ during the 1980s. For many of the coalition’s most dangerous elite were drawn from the Plateaux region, outside his native Cuvette region. This implied a communication advantage among elites outside the inner circle, which would have made social club monitoring less effective.

The war’s great irony was how well it served Sassou Nguesso’s longer term interests. Confident his 1992 decline was definitive, most of Sassou Nguesso’s 1980s allies adjusted to the democratic landscape by condemning his atrocities and trumpeting their democratic credentials. Thus Sassou Nguesso’s screening device: Only the loyalists refused posts in the new government, decamped with Sassou Nguesso to Paris or to their native regions, and then fought in the Cobra militia during the 1997 war. In the context of the model, Sassou Nguesso made these loyalists his inner circle upon his return to power, and they were the GLC’s first members. This is illustrated by Figure 5.

Of the ministers included in the GLC in 1997, 80% occupied prominent posts in Sassou Nguesso’s war effort; fully 100% of the generals in the GLC in 1997 occupied a prominent post in the war effort. Indeed, the first general not implicated in the 1997 war effort was initiated only in 2002. And in 2011, nearly 15 years after the conclusion of the war, 40% of the GLC’s ministers and 70% of its generals were major actors in Sassou Nguesso’s war on Brazzaville. In its early years, then, the GLC was but a small gathering of Sassou Nguesso’s closest friends and family, virtually all of
whom stood by his side as he plotted to retake Brazzaville by force.

Although Sassou Nguesso inherited multiparty and electoral institutions upon his 1997 return, the set of political elites was much weaker than in 1979. For he owed his wartime triumph largely to French president Jacques Chirac, who persuaded his Angolan counterpart, José Eduardo Dos Santos, to provide troops and weaponry; and the incumbent Congolese political elite was virtually destroyed during the war for Brazzaville. Sassou Nguesso exploited this autonomy by filling his first governments with his children, nephews, and cousins. They occupied the top two positions in the state oil company, the Société Nationale de Pétrole Congolais. They oversaw the government’s

Figure 5: The proportion of GLC initiates who occupied civil war posts.
oil marketing arm, Cotrade. They directed the national railroad company. They directed the national ground transportation company. They oversaw presidential security and most of the sensitive military commands. Sassou Nguesso owed his power to few, and he took advantage of this autonomy when it came to sensitive appointments. Whereas successive governments since 1968 had been dominated by northerners, Sassou Nguesso’s new inner circle was dominated by Cuvette regionals, and Oyo natives in particular.

Sassou Nguesso expanded the GLC between 2001 and 2005, as Figure 1 demonstrated. Proposition 1 makes sense of this. The right side y-axis of Figure 1 estimates “unaccounted for” oil revenue by year: essentially the difference between the value of Congo’s reported oil sales and the revenue reported by the state oil company. \(^{21}\) Sassou Nguesso managed to siphon several hundred million dollars from state coffers during his first years in power, yielding an expanded inner circle that, by 2001 and 2002, supported a large elite social club. Hence the membership spike between 2001 and 2005, depicted in Figure 1. As siphoned state revenue increased even further between 2006 and 2007, Sassou Nguesso rapidly expanded the GLC’s membership, as Proposition 1 suggests.

4.2 The Determinants of GLC Membership

Sassou Nguesso thus expanded his GLC between 2001 and 2005. Proposition 1 suggests the expanded social club should have been virtually indistinguishable from his expanding governing coalition, since the social club itself enables the autocrat to expand the coalition at relatively low cost.

To probe the determinants of GLC membership, I employ a simple logit model:

\[
GLC_{it} = \alpha_1 (High\ Level\ Appointment_{it}) + \alpha_2 (Civil\ War\ Post_{i}) + \alpha_3 (Family_{i}) \\
+ \alpha_4 (Concubine_{i}) + \alpha_5 (PCT\ or\ Allied\ Party_{it}) + \gamma_i + \delta_t, \tag{9}
\]

The outcome variable is \(GLC_{it}\), which assumes value 1 if elite \(i\) was a GLC member in year \(t\). The explanatory variable of interest is \(High\ Level\ Appointment_{it}\), a trichotomous variable coded with the assistance of a team of Congolese research assistants. The variable assumes value 2 if elite \(i\) held one of the regime’s most important positions in year \(t\); it assumes value 1 if elite \(i\) held a high ranking position in a less sensitive government institution or a mid-level position in a very sensitive government institution in year \(t\); and it assumes value 0 if elite \(i\) either received a trivial appointment in year \(t\) or was excluded altogether. For each year since 1997 the dataset records approximately 70 entries for which \(High\ Level\ Appointment\) equals 2, 85 entries for which \(High\ Level\ Appointment\) equals 1, and 650 entries for which \(High\ Level\ Appointment\) equals 0. \(^{22}\)

\(^{21}\) I developed this measure with a representative of a leading international financial institution in Brazzaville; although we cannot be certain about the absolute figures, the trend is correct. He requested anonymity.

\(^{22}\) The first substantive chapter of my dissertation probes the determinants of \(High\ Level\ Appointment_{it}\). The central result: Sassou Nguesso recruits for his regime’s most important positions based on the proximity of an elite’s home village to his own, which generates common knowledge among elites about their (very affluent) economic welfare and thus reticence to engage in conspiracies. This effect holds when controlling for co-ethnicity with Sassou Nguesso;
Figure 6: The left $y$-axis records the number of days per moving three month period that Sassou Nguesso spent outside Congo. The right $y$-axis records the amount of Congo’s unaccounted for oil revenue, presumably stolen by Sassou Nguesso.

I include a range of other control variables: whether elite $i$ is a member of Sassou Nguesso’s family, is widely regarded as among his many concubines, served prominently in his civil war effort, or is a member of Sassou Nguesso’s PCT or an allied party in year $t$. The variables are summarized in Table 1.

The results appear in columns 1 and 2 of Table 2. As expected, the effect of high level appointment on GLC membership is significant, both statistically and substantively. Congolese political indeed, co-ethnicity with Sassou Nguesso has no effect on the probability of high level appointment once village proximity is controlled for.
elites who do not hold a high level position in Sassou Nguesso’s government have a roughly 5% change of being selected for the GLC. Receiving a high level appointment, by contrast, increases the probability of GLC membership to greater than 60%. Consistent with the model, Sassou Nguesso also overwhelmingly includes his civil war loyalists, both civilian and military. Indeed, this group comprised his earliest inner circle, and they were also among its first members.

4.3 The Effect of GLC Membership on Elite Behavior

The left $y$-axis of Figure 6 records Sassou Nguesso’s foreign travel since seizing power in October 1997. Since foreign trips are precisely when autocrats are most vulnerable to conspirators – with the seat of power essentially vacant, conspirators have only to seize the state media apparatus, airport, and a handful of governing institutions in the capital – an autocrat’s willingness to travel abroad provides a good approximation of his internal security. The great turning point for Sassou Nguesso appears to be in 2004 or 2005, when he began campaigning for the presidency of the African Union; Sassou Nguesso styled himself an elder statesman, immersing himself in the Sudan

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Variable Definitions}
\begin{tabular}{llp{10cm}}
\hline
Variable & Type & Description \\
\hline
GLC & \{0,1\} & Assumes value 1 if elite $i$ is a member of the Sassou Nguesso’s Grande Loge du Congo – otherwise known as Elikia – during year $t$. \\
High Level Appointment & \{0,1,2\} & Assumes value 2 if elite $i$ held one of the regime’s most important positions in year $t$; it assumes value 1 if elite $i$ held a high ranking position in a less sensitive government institution or a mid-level position in a very sensitive government institution in year $t$; and it assumes value 0 if elite $i$ either received a trivial appointment in year $t$ or was excluded altogether. \\
Family & \{0,1\} & Assumes values 1 if elite $i$ is a member of Sassou Nguesso’s extended family. \\
Concubine & \{0,1\} & Assumes values 1 if elite $i$ is widely regarded as a mistress of Sassou Nguesso. \\
Civil War Post & \{0,1\} & Assumes values 1 if elite $i$ held a significant position in Sassou Nguesso’s civil war effort. \\
PCT or Allied Party & \{0,1\} & Assumes values 1 if elite $i$ is a member of the PCT or an allied political party in year $t$. \\
Challenge & \{0,1\} & Assumes values 1 if elite $i$ is included in a nascent coup d’état conspiracy or otherwise publicly criticizes Sassou Nguesso in year $t$. \\
\hline
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Significance levels: †: 10%  *: 5%  **: 1%
and Cote d’Ivoire crises and representing Africa at summits around the world. And rather than taking his annual August vacation in his native village of Oyo, he henceforth preferred Marbella, Spain, a haven for the global super rich.

This coincides with the latter half of the GLC’s expansion, suggesting that the GLC itself may have helped Sassou Nguesso establish his authority over Congo’s political elite. To determine whether GLC membership causes elites to engage in less anti-regime behavior, I construct the variable \( \text{Challenge}_{it} \), a dichotomous indicator that assumes value 1 if elite \( i \) was included in a nascent coup d’état conspiracy or otherwise criticized Sassou Nguesso in year \( t \). Like the other variables in my dataset, I construct the \( \text{Challenge}_{it} \) variable based on archival research in Brazzaville’s three leading newspapers and some 150 key informant interviews. Of the dataset’s nearly 15,000 elite-year observations, nearly 2,200 included some sort of challenge to Sassou Nguesso, or just less than 150 challenges per year. Public criticism from the political opposition constitutes the overwhelming majority of these challenges. The dataset also includes, however, several sharp challenges from high-ranking regime figures, all of which occurred in private, and four nascent coup conspiracies, involving another 20 high ranking regime figures.

Identifying the causal effect of GLC membership on anti-regime behavior is difficult, for the treatment assignment mechanism is decidedly non-random: Sassou Nguesso awards high level appointment, and then compels GLC membership, strategically. Initiates, consequently, are systematically different than their non-initiated counterparts. I overcome this by employing two identification strategies. First, I employ a conventional fixed effects estimator to assess the effect of GLC membership on “within-elite” behavior over time:

\[
\text{Challenge}_{it} = \beta_1 (\text{GLC}_{it}) + \beta_2 (\text{High Level Appointment}_{it}) + \gamma_i + \delta_t, \tag{10}
\]

where \( \gamma_i \) and \( \delta_t \) control for unobserved elite and year-level characteristics, respectively. Equation (10) exploits temporal variation in elite anti-regime behavior. For since the majority of GLC initiates joined after 2002, they accumulated significant public records prior to initiation. The parameter \( \beta_1 \), in turn, gives the causal effect of interest.

Second, I employ a propensity score matching estimator that uses the results from Proposition 1 and the statistical results from Section 5.2 to explicitly model the treatment assignment mechanism. More practically, by computing the probability of treatment — that is, that elite \( i \) is a GLC member in year \( t \) — equation (9) yields a propensity score. I then prune the dataset to create treatment and control groups that are similar in all respects but GLC membership. The result is treatment and control groups that have essentially identical probabilities of having joined the GLC. Finally, I estimate the causal effect of GLC membership on the probability of an elite challenge to Sassou

\[24\] To be clear, I pool the data when creating treatment and control groups: I include elite \( i \)’s pre-initiation observations as part of his potential control group.
Table 3: Balance Improvement for Matched Data

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<th>Means Control</th>
<th>Means Treated</th>
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<td>Matched Data</td>
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<td>Distance</td>
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<td>0.080</td>
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<td>0.466</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
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</table>

Nguesso, using both a logit and linear probability model:

\[
\text{Challenge}_{it} = \beta_1 (\text{GLC}_{it}) + \beta_2 (\text{Propensity Score}_i),
\]  

Equation (11) yields an unbiased estimate of the treatment effect \( \gamma_1 \) as long as the outcome – a challenge to Sassou Nguesso – is independent of treatment status, conditional on the propensity score.

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the treatment and control groups, both prior to and following the matching algorithm. Although the matching algorithm reduces the dataset to just under 1,200 observations – representing nearly 200 members of the elite – it creates treatment and control groups that are essentially identical in all respects save treatment status. GLC initiates and non-initiates, in this matched dataset, are equally likely to be members of Sassou Nguesso’s family, his concubine, the PCT, and his civil war effort. Most importantly, as the results above suggest, the treatment and control groups draw equally from the regime’s highest ranking positions.

The results appear in columns 3 through 6 of Table 2, and they are remarkably consistent across specifications. In both fixed effects and matching models GLC membership causes a significant change in elite behavior. GLC members, column 6 suggests, challenge Sassou Nguesso nearly 7% less than their non-initiated counterparts. This effect is estimated with relative precision across models, significant at the 10% level in the fixed effects estimators and the 1% level in the matching estimators.

This effect may seem relatively small. It is, however, practically very significant. For the regime’s most important positions are financially extremely lucrative, and their occupants quickly join the ranks of the global rich, and perhaps even the super rich. They own luxury apartments across Paris, mostly in the affluent 8th and 16th arrondissements and, in one case, on the Île de la Cité; they construct enormous villas throughout Congo; and their access to state revenue and enforcement mechanisms enables them to create relatively durable business interests. Sassou Nguesso, of course, possesses sole authority to appoint and remove office holders. That any of them are willing to challenge him is, therefore, quite surprising itself. A 7% reduction, in this context, is
thus significant indeed.

4.4 Refusing Initiation

Sassou Nguesso knows that non-initiates are especially likely to attempt coups; they, after all, are generally excluded from revenue sharing agreements. More importantly, he also knows the act of refusing an invitation is a signal itself. It implies an elite is unwilling to accept the higher probability that his coup conspiracies are detected in their nascent stages. Hence the otherwise puzzling assassination attempts on Matthias Dzon and Justin Lekoundzou, neither of whom occupied a sensitive position in the coalition when they were targeted for assassination.

Accepting GLC membership is akin, for an elite, to relinquishing the coup d’état option. The years since their assassination attempts have demonstrated that neither Lekoundzou nor Dzon was quite ready to relinquish this. Shortly after seizing power, Sassou Nguesso attempted to remove the dissonance between the PCT’s formal institutional structure, which conferred institutional power upon Lekoundzou’s old guard, and the realities of informal political power, which favored Sassou Nguesso himself. He did so by aiming to eliminate the PCT altogether, acting through surrogates: a group which came to be known as the refondateurs, the refounders. For the PCT, they said, was founded as a socialist party; since its economic policies were socialist no longer – who, after all, could argue with that? – the party should be replaced with a new one. Lekoundzou quickly pronounced himself opposed to the liquidation; in October 2006 Lekoundzou convened a congress of his supporters. After a series of very public disputes, Sassou Nguesso “[called] for an end to PCT divisions,” a euphemism for concession. Lekoundzou, somehow, won the battle to preserve the PCT.

Lekoundzou would not, however, win the war. For instead of liquidating the PCT, Sassou Nguesso instead opted to create an alliance: the Rassemblement de la Majorité Presidentielle, the Presidential Majority Assembly, with the elephant as its symbol. The implicit signal was clear: Sassou Nguesso fully intended to trample any opposition in the upcoming 2009 presidential elections, fairly or otherwise. The RMP ultimately claimed some 60 member parties, several of which had even been formed by Sassou Nguesso’s progeny. For by expanding the number of allied parties, Sassou Nguesso succeeded in rendering the PCT essentially irrelevant, merely one of 60 parties that supported him. This move yielded another benefit for Sassou Nguesso. By creating a structure that was coherent only in its loyalty to him, Sassou Nguesso created a governing infrastructure that could not be usurped; it would essentially self-destruct if Sassou Nguesso was removed. This, in turn, rendered coups d’état less attractive.

Lekoundzou, of course, realized all this. But at this point all he possessed was the legacy of the PCT Old Guard, personified by Marien Ngouabi himself. He thus created his own group, the Association Marien Ngouabi et Ethique, to “harness the spirit” of PCT founder Marien Ngouabi.

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himself a freemason, and provide a “shield” against Sassou Nguesso’s GLC. The Association’s more practical effect: It created a focal point for Sassou Nguesso’s opponents, a forum where they could plan Sassou Nguesso’s removal. Sassou Nguesso’s continued refusal to authorize its existence is thus thoroughly unsurprising.

Dzon, for his part, was always suspected of having grander political aspirations than a simple ministerial post. He confirmed them in the presidential elections of 2009, when he mounted the only credible opposition campaign against Sassou Nguesso. He too has been at the center of recent coup d’état suspicions, reportedly stockpiling weapons outside his native Gamboma.

5 Conclusion

This chapter develops a theory of one historically common autocratic survival strategy: “unite and rule,” which exploits the presence of a regime inner circle to monitor an autocrat’s most sensitive appointments. Consistent with its theoretical expectations, the paper found strong evidence that Sassou Nguesso’s elite social club caused its members to engage in less anti-regime behavior than their non-initiated counterparts.

These results challenge prevailing theoretical and empirical approaches to autocratic politics. Theoretically, political scientists increasingly believe that autocrats create formal political institutions to facilitate credible commitments with their elite. Yet Africa’s autocrats have dismantled political institutions far more than they have constructed them, suggesting that the prevailing focus on political institutions as determinants of autocratic durability may be misplaced. Political scientists have also long assumed that autocrats prefer to keep their elites divided, reducing the probability of elite collective action and, ultimately, coups d’état. This chapter argues precisely the opposite. Autocrats often have an interest in creating dense social ties among their elite, the better to monitor those who are potentially disloyal. More broadly, and as historians have long emphasized, autocrats prevent elite conspiracies by managing their elite on a very personal level: Some elites are forced to join compulsory elite social clubs, others are targeted for inclusion in marriage networks, some are forced to compete against each other for the autocrat’s favor, and all are selectively recruited into the governing coalition based on an autocrat’s interest in facilitating elite communication.

The chapter’s theoretical predictions, like much of those in political science, focus on the behavior of individual elite. Empirically, then, the chapter insists on a research design in which the unit of analysis is the elite as well. This precision is particularly important in the field of autocratic politics. For the prevailing focus on country-year analysis is unable to capture the myriad ways in which autocrats render elite conspiracies less likely. With a unique elite-year dataset that permits causal inference statistics, this chapter, and the larger dissertation, provides a model for future research.
References


