



Leveraging weakness into strength: how neo-patrimonial oil-producing countries survive economic crises

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Abstract

Most scholarship on major oil-producing countries (OPCs) focuses on their illiberal characteristics, but scant research explores how these regimes react to periodic oil price collapses, particularly neo-patrimonial OPCs with relatively low state capacity, herein termed gatekeeper OPCs. These OPCs should be extremely vulnerable to regime change during economic crises. However, since the most recent collapse in international oil markets in 2014, almost all neo-patrimonial OPCs have managed to weather the ensuing fallout, thereby begging the question of how these seemingly vulnerable regimes manage to survive extended periods of economic crises. We hypothesise that the likelihood of regime survival in neo-patrimonial OPCs depends on a strategic calibration of domestic neo-patrimonial policies, such as clientelism and executive aggrandisement, and the skilled navigation of global geopolitics. We find evidence that incumbent governments leverage international geopolitical tensions during economic crises to secure valuable foreign aid from key allies, which allows them to maintain the domestic neo-patrimonial strategies required to safeguard their power. We reached the above finding through a nested mixed-methods research design combining quantitative analysis of 35 major OPCs from 2011 to 2018 using Cox proportional hazards models with the qualitative comparison of two gatekeeper OPCs—Chad and Venezuela.

Keywords Authoritarian resilience · Economic crisis · International autonomy · International political economy · Neopatrimonialism · Oil

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Table 1 Liberal democratic and hybrid OPCs

OPC	State capacity	Economic crisis	Regime type	Neopatrimonialism
Colombia	M-High		Hybrid	Low
Ecuador	M-High		Hybrid	Medium
Ghana	Medium		Liberal Democracy	Low
Malaysia	Medium		Electoral Autocracy	Medium–Low
Mexico	Medium		Hybrid	Low
Nigeria	Medium		Hybrid	Medium–Low
Norway	High		Liberal Democracy	Low
Surinam	Medium		Hybrid	Low
Trinidad and Tobago	Medium–High (2011–14); High (2015–18)		Hybrid	Low
Tunisia	M-High		Hybrid	Low

Introduction

For political regimes whose legitimacy is based on patronage, economic crises represent existential threats, as these shocks create significant pressures and incentives for powerful organisations from within or outside the ruling coalition to force regime change (O'Donnell and Schmitter 2013; Tilly 2003). The political regimes of major oil-producing countries (OPCs), or those countries whose yearly average oil rents' share of gross domestic product (GDP) during the boom-bust period of 2011 to 2018 was at or above the global mean of about 3.5%, have been particularly susceptible to economic crises, herein defined as a 10% downturn in GDP per capita over two or more consecutive years (<https://data.worldbank.org/> (11 May 2020); Diamond 2010; Karl 1997). Moreover, most OPCs are authoritarian to varying degrees. The Varieties of Democracy project classified 26 of the world's 35 major OPCs as some form of autocracy between 2011 and 2018 (see Tables 1, 2, 3, 4). Hence, incumbents in most OPCs are more likely to set up barriers to prevent potential political regime transitions and thereby lack the institutional mechanisms to peacefully resolve the

Table 2 Absolutist OPCs

OPC	State capacity	Economic crisis	Regime type	Neopatrimonialism
Gabon	High		Electoral Autocracy	Medium
Iran	Medium–High	2012–2015	Electoral Autocracy	Medium
Kuwait	Medium		Closed Autocracy	Low
Oman	High	2016–2018	Closed Autocracy	Medium–Low
Qatar	Medium–High	2015–2016	Closed Autocracy	Medium
Saudi Arabia	Med.–High (2011–16); Medium (2017–18)		Closed Autocracy	Medium
United Arab Emirates	High		Closed Autocracy	Medium–Low



Table 3 Neo-patrimonial OPCs

OPC	State capacity	Economic crisis	Regime type	Neopatrimonialism
Algeria	Medium		Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High
Angola	Medium	2016–2018	Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High
Azerbaijan	Medium-Low	2016–2018	Electoral Autocracy	High
Bahrain	Low (2011–13); M-Low (2014–18)	2015–2016	Closed Autocracy	Medium-High
Cameroon	Med.–Low (2011–15); Low (2016–18)		Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High
Egypt	Medium-Low		Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High
Congo Brazzaville	Medium-Low	2015–2018	Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High
Iraq	Low (2011–15); Med.–Low (2016–2018)	2016–2018	Electoral Autocracy	Medium-Low
Kazakhstan	Medium		Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High
Libya	Low	2014–2016	Closed Autocracy	Medium-Low
Russia	Medium		Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High
South Sudan	Low	2016–2018	Closed Autocracy	Medium-High
Sudan	Medium-Low	2017–2018	Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High
Yemen	Low	2015–2018	Electoral Autocracy	Medium-High



Table 4 Gatekeeper OPCs

OPC	State capacity	Economic crisis	Regime type	Neopatrimonialism
Chad	Med.–Low (2011–16); Low (2017–18)	2016–2018	Electoral Autocracy	High
Equatorial Guinea	Medium–Low	2016–2018	Electoral Autocracy	High
Turkmenistan	Low		Electoral Autocracy	High
Venezuela	Med.–Low (2011–16); Low (2017–18)	2016–2018	Electoral Autocracy	High

pressures and challenges created by sharp economic downturns (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Ross 2001; de Mesquita et al. 2003).

Authoritarian OPCs tend to use neo-patrimonial mechanisms to quell dissent, namely the clientelist co-optation of powerful organisations and pliant citizens alike through oil-financed rentierism, a system of patronage that allocates revenues towards regime loyalists (Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Guliyev 2013; Goldman 2008; Goldthau and Westphal 2019). Neopatrimonialism refers to the domestic strategies that allow incumbent governments to ‘buy-in’ political support and legitimacy through clientelist political relationships while also aggrandising executive powers to remain in power (Islam 2013; Bratton and van de Walle 1997). This concept is rather protean and stems from the development of Weberian patrimonial subject-leader relations seen in authoritarian regimes after the globalisation of electoral democracy in the late 20th century (Erdmann and Engel 2007; Fukuyama 2014). As recent events in Sudan and Kazakhstan demonstrate, neo-patrimonial OPCs appear quite vulnerable to declines in international oil markets, given that ‘buy-in can run into crisis when the money runs low’ (De Waal 2009: 112). However, most of these regimes have clung to power steadfastly since the 2014 oil price bust, thereby raising the important question: How do regimes in neo-patrimonial OPCs survive economic crises?

This paper contributes to the rich contemporary debate on the international political economy of authoritarian resilience by examining how the most unlikely political regimes survive periods of extreme economic pressure (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Heydemann et al. 2020; Smith 2006). Additionally, our work further develops the established research agenda on OPCs by providing an original typology to analyse the different regime types found amongst the many cases characterised by oil-based rentierism by deploying state capacity as a key variable for classification purposes.

The following section discusses the differences among OPCs and a particular category of them, neo-patrimonial OPCs, which exhibit a relatively low state capacity and are therefore particularly vulnerable to economic crises. The third section specifies our two-level model explaining regime survival in neo-patrimonial OPCs during economic crises. These countries weather turbulent periods by leveraging larger



geopolitical rivalries at the international level to extract crucial military and economic support from key allies to offset their weakened state capacity while simultaneously streamlining clientelist rent deployment at the domestic level during these crises. The fourth section details our nested mixed-method research design.

The fifth section provides the results of our quantitative analysis conducted through Cox proportional hazards models, allowing us to identify the political-economic strategies deployed by 35 OPCs during the boom-bust period between 2011 and 2018 through interaction terms, which help increase the probability of their regime survival. The quantitative analysis finds that the likelihood of regime survival in neo-patrimonial OPCs depends on a strategic balancing act of international and domestic policies, yet we find that the former determines regime survival during economic crises.

The sixth section engages in a qualitative comparative analysis of Chad and Venezuela, two gatekeeper OPCs, or neo-patrimonial countries with extremely low state capacity, which appear to be most vulnerable to severe economic crises. This section examines how incumbents in gatekeeper OPCs leverage international geopolitical tensions to secure valuable foreign aid from key allies, permitting them to maintain clientelist mechanisms required to safeguard their power at home. Additionally, this analysis shows how two gatekeeper OPCs with drastically different socio-historical conditions are far from passive agents in global geopolitics. Rather, these 'weak' or 'fragile' states take advantage of regional and international rivalries and conflicts to attract crucial foreign financial, military, and technological assistance to bolster their domestic capacities and weather severe economic crises. We finalise with a brief discussion of our findings and their implications for the literature.

Towards a new typology of OPCs? The role of state capacity

Economic crises in authoritarian OPCs empower potential opponents 'both within the ruling elite and among outsiders in society', as the weakened inner cohesion of these regimes provide windows of opportunity to force executive turnovers, whether through institutional or extra-institutional means (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007: 1288; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Diamond 2010). Yet, not all OPCs are equally vulnerable to massive economic downturns, as their susceptibility depends on their state capacity. We define state capacity as a continuum between the presence and absence of a Weberian bureaucracy, meaning the presence of hierarchical state organisations with bureaucrats that exercise their duties based on codified and impartial rules (Cornell et al. 2020). This definition of state capacity is independent of regime type, as it does not assume outcomes of public administration, such as governmental effectiveness.

We propose a typology categorising OPCs into four groups: liberal democratic/hybrid, absolutist, neo-patrimonial, and gatekeeper OPCs. Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 show the levels of state capacity, periods of economic crisis, regime type, and levels of



neopatrimonialism in the 35 analysed OPCs, divided into each of the four categories.¹ *Liberal democratic* and *hybrid* OPCs, depicted in Table 1, such as Norway, Ghana, and Colombia, show relatively high state capacity, little reliance on neo-patrimonial mechanisms compared to other OPCs, and an absence of economic crises from 2011 to 2018.

Predictably, authoritarian OPCs, depicted in Tables 2, 3, and 4, were more likely to experience severe economic downturns perpetuated by oil price busts, which should have made challenges to their incumbent rulers more likely. However, not all authoritarian OPCs are the same. Closed and electoral autocratic OPCs with high state capacity, or *absolutist* OPCs, are relatively stable and rely on neo-patrimonial mechanisms to a certain extent, as evidenced by countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE (Diamond 2010; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). In absolutist OPCs, oil-based patronage provides an extra layer of stability for the political regime, as the elite organisations supporting the regime, such as the military or religious institutions, created durable political regimes before the exploitation of oil. Thus, severe economic downturns do not necessarily endanger the survival of these regimes (Smith 2006).

In contrast, authoritarian OPCs with relatively low state capacity that rely more heavily on the deployment of clientelist strategies, or *neo-patrimonial* OPCs, are more susceptible to challenges by political competitors after massive economic downturns. Neo-patrimonial OPCs, such as Algeria, Cameroon, or Russia, maintain the quiescence of powerful organisations and common citizens alike by simultaneously co-opting these actors through oil-financed ‘buy-ins’ to avoid fractures leading to a possible military coup or other forms of political competition, while also deterring popular dissent through the threat or actual deployment of violence (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Ross 2001; Goldman 2008).

However, a subset of neo-patrimonial OPCs is even more vulnerable during economic crises. One can characterise these countries that suffer from precarious state capacity as *gatekeeper* OPCs, where ‘[r]egime survival is a constant challenge for and preoccupation by governments’ (Henningsen and Gissel 2020: 5). Gatekeeper OPCs, such as Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Venezuela, achieve regime survival by foregoing any semblance of Weberian state capacity. Instead, these countries concentrate on controlling the nodal points or ‘gates’ connecting their societies to the international economy to guarantee their political survival (Cooper 2019). There exists a conceptual overlap between gatekeeper states and fragile states, as both are characterised by their precarious levels of state capacity and vulnerability to violent conflict (Babajide et al. 2021). However, the former concept differs from the latter insofar as it refers exclusively to those political regimes in resource-rich countries that can maintain power while possessing extremely low state capacity. Unsurprisingly, all gatekeeper OPCs, except Turkmenistan, reported severe economic

¹ All tables created by the authors with data sources explained in the research design section. We converted the ‘neopatrimonialism’ and ‘state capacity’ indicators into a five-point scale. Low (one) or High (five) indicate scores of the original indicator below or above one or half a standard deviation from the yearly mean of the 35 analysed OPCs from 2011 to 2018, respectively. Similarly, Medium–Low (2) or Medium–High (4) indicate scores below or above one-half from a standard deviation from the mean, respectively, but no greater than one. Medium scores (3) lie within one-half standard deviation from the mean. Furthermore, we excluded Brunei due to incomplete data.



downturns after the 2014 collapse in international oil prices. However, what is surprising is that all of these regimes have weathered the ensuing crisis period and have clung to power until the present by deepening crucial alliances abroad to offset heavily streamlined rent deployment at home.

A two-level model of regime survival in neo-patrimonial OPCs

Our model follows the path of other works that seek to explain how incumbent governments juggle priorities and coordinate policy in multi-level strategic games encompassing domestic and international politics (Putnam 1988). However, this 'two-level game' differs as it analyses neo-patrimonial regimes within the wider pool of OPCs. Neo-patrimonial OPCs are vulnerable to international oil market fluctuations and do not normally achieve policy consensus through institutional negotiations but co-optation and repression. Given the incentives and structural dynamics found in the broader array of authoritarian OPCs, the option of a negotiated transition, especially those produced by pressures from civil society and mass mobilisations, is rare outside of liberal democratic and hybrid OPCs and thus is not included in this analysis (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007).

The first level of our model represents the domestic neo-patrimonial strategies adopted by OPCs to appease key actors through clientelist mechanisms, especially the military, while purging other stakeholders whose support is deemed expendable when state resources become increasingly scarce. One can see the political use of neo-patrimonial mechanisms, namely economic patronage by a regime's agents, in countries that only superficially adopted democratic norms and institutions (Islam 2013; Bratton and van de Walle 1997). Moreover, given that clientelist patronage requires discretionary spending by the executive, the executive needs to have more power relative to other branches of government to increase the political effectiveness of such mechanisms (Erdmann and Engel 2007; López Maya 2018).

Incumbent regimes in neo-patrimonial OPCs increase neo-patrimonial mechanisms to reconfigure their ruling coalitions by making state expenditure more exclusionary (Byman and Lind 2010). Such political restructuring promotes 'personal loyalists to top party and government posts while purging rivals, thereby converting institutional constraints into institutional weapons,' effectively prioritising those stakeholders whose support is deemed crucial for their ongoing survival (Slater 2003: 88). By streamlining clientelist redistribution, beleaguered neo-patrimonial OPCs secure the loyalty of the security forces, which can defend the regime from internal and external threats. While this strategy enables 'coup-proofing' during periods of economic and social stability, it becomes crucial during periods of economic crisis (De Bruin 2018; Albrecht 2015).

The second level of our model represents the international system and the pressures and constraints placed on neo-patrimonial OPCs by their positions in the global order. The international political economy of oil draws all OPCs into the complex vagaries of international geopolitics between competing hegemonies (Gould and Winters 2012; Casey 2020; Heydemann et al. 2020). Regimes in OPCs invariably are forced to navigate the treacherous waters of great power



politics and simultaneously satisfy the demands of domestic groups, a balancing act of international and domestic priorities, which for neo-patrimonial OPCs turns into a high-stakes strategy of regime survival when oil prices inevitably collapse (Colom-Jaén and Campos-Serrano 2013; Mijares 2017).

For neo-patrimonial OPCs, geopolitical positioning plays a key ontological role in shaping domestic policies such as the domestic distribution of oil rents through clientelist mechanisms. Neo-patrimonial OPCs, like other states in the international system, either support the *status quo* hegemonic power alliance or pursue a *revisionist* anti-hegemonic foreign policy (Organski 1958). Whereas status-quo states are content to maintain the established order of things, revisionists seek to change the global distribution of power and goods in their favour (Davidson 2016; Chan et al. 2019). Nevertheless, analyses of status-quo and revisionist states in the International Relations literature have largely focused on great powers, thus diverting attention away from how states with relatively low state capacity (e.g. neo-patrimonial OPCs) can leverage their position in the international sphere. These regimes demonstrate an ability and willingness to enhance their international autonomy or the extent to which they can pursue foreign policy alignments without direct external imposition, shaping their domestic capacities (Tang 2018; Stipić 2016).

For neo-patrimonial OPCs, especially the subset of gatekeeper OPCs, their international autonomy serves as a vital lifeline to attract crucial resources and technologies to bolster their internal stability, particularly during economic crises. This strategy provides military and economic support from stronger allies, valuable intelligence transfers, and repressive know-how to survive existential challenges from hostile domestic, transnational, and foreign organisations (Diamond 2010; Pemunta and Tabenyang 2016). Our analysis demonstrates how many of the existing explanations found in recent scholarship on International Relations often overstate the effects of hegemonic alliances and ignore the agency of less powerful countries in shaping outcomes on the international stage (Kim and Woods 2016; Chan et al. 2019). Moreover, OPCs have disproportionate regional and global significance due to their vital oil resources, which low-capacity OPCs can leverage to their advantage.

This paper's main hypothesis derived from the above two-level model is that:

H1 We expect a particular interaction between domestic policies (e.g., a greater degree of neopatrimonialism) and international policies (e.g., a more autonomous foreign policy) will lead to regime survival.

If the quantitative analysis supports an interaction effect between the domestic and international policies employed by OPCs to weather the boom-bust period of 2011–2018, then we will analyse the following subsidiary hypotheses during this same timeframe:

H2 Periods of economic crisis condition the interaction between domestic policies, thus increasing the likelihood of regime survival in OPCs when the degree of neopatrimonialism increases during economic crises.



H3 Periods of economic crisis condition the interaction between the international policies, thus increasing the likelihood of regime survival in OPCs when international autonomy increases during economic crises.

The second and third hypotheses aim to isolate whether the domestic and international strategies are crucial during periods of economic crises.

Research design

Our paper utilises Lieberman's (2005) nested mixed-method research design to test the above hypotheses and ultimately answer how authoritarian OPCs survive periods of economic crisis. Using a quantitative analysis of 35 major OPCs between 2011 and 2018, we test our hypotheses and identify a relationship between the two-level model developed in the previous section and the likelihood of regime survival during this boom-bust period. This timeframe allows us to focus on the immediate effects of the 2014 international oil price and include South Sudan in the analysis. The quantitative analysis ends in 2018, as this was the last year of available data for the outcome variable. Subsequently, we deploy a qualitative comparative analysis of two gatekeeper OPCs—Chad and Venezuela—to complement our quantitative analysis by tracing the processes laid out in the confirmed hypotheses, thus allowing us to test further the paper's model (Lieberman 2005). The qualitative analysis focuses on the period after the collapse of international oil prices in 2014 until the present.

The quantitative analysis

We first test our hypotheses through Cox proportional hazards models (henceforth, Cox models). Cox models are widely used to analyse authoritarian survival, as they do not assume the shape of the baseline hazard to estimate an event's probability of occurring (Casey 2020; Wallace 2013). Our analysed event is regime change, which we codified as one when a significant political change occurred within an incumbent regime. We sourced the occurrence of regime change from the regime durability indicator of the Polity5 database, which codes regime change as a change in the Polity score of three or more points occurring within a three-year period, which follows from drastic changes within a political regime or its replacement with another (<https://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html> (28 June 2021)).

Our basic Cox model is:

$$\text{Regime Change}(t) = \text{Regime Change}_0(t) \times \exp[b_{1-3}X + b_{4-8}Z]$$

Three covariates in our basic Cox model (X) are of main interest for our hypotheses, which are:

- Neopatrimonialism: this indicator helps us operationalise the domestic strategy, sourced from the Varieties of Democracy' (V-Dem) neo-patrimonial rule index (Coppedge et al. 2021). This indicator measures the degree of 'clientelistic political relationships, strong and unconstrained presidents, and the use of



public resources for political legitimisation' (Coppedge et al. 2021: 290; Bratton and Walle 1997a, b). The operationalisation of the index is a coefficient interval ranging from zero (least neo-patrimonial) to one (most neo-patrimonial).

- International Autonomy: this covariate sourced from the V-Dem project helps us operationalise the international strategy (Coppedge et al. 2021). It measures the extent of a country's foreign policy autonomy on a continuous interval ranging from minus two (no foreign policy autonomy) to two (full foreign policy autonomy). This covariate helps us operationalise the ability of OPCs to navigate international geopolitics, independent of pressures and coercions by great powers (Tang 2018; Stipić 2016).
- Economic Crisis: this dummy variable denotes each year that a country experienced a 10% decline in its GDP per capita (at purchasing power parity, international US dollars) after two or more consecutive years (<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/datasets/WEO> (10 May 2021)).

Our basic Cox model also includes five politico-economic control variables (Z), which are:

- State Capacity: we estimate Weberian state capacity through the V-Dem project's 'rigorous and impartial public administration' indicator (Coppedge et al. 2021), which measures the degree to which public officials exercise their duties impartially and based on codified norms (Cornell et al. 2020). We converted the original scale into a five-point categorical variable as detailed in endnote one.
- Regime Type: the 'Regimes of the World measure,' from the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al. 2021), controls for OPCs' political regimes based on the ability of domestic agents to access power, polyarchy. This ordinal variable ranges from zero (closed autocracy) to four (liberal democracy).
- Oil Prices: the average yearly oil prices control for changing conditions in the international oil market. We sourced the yearly average Europe Brent crude oil price spot, OPEC's main price index (<https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafH.ashx?n=PET&s=RBRT&f=A> (20 Mar 2021)).
- Oil Rents: yearly average oil rent income as a share of GDP per country controls how a changing international crude market affects the revenues of OPCs (<https://data.worldbank.org/> (11 May 2020)).
- State Violence: this interval variable from zero (high state violence) to one (low state violence) sourced from V-Dem's 'Physical Violence Index' measures a government's use of violence, which controls for different degrees of violent conflict in an OPC, ranging from the repression of dissent to counterinsurgency (Coppedge et al. 2021).

Regarding model diagnostics of the basic Cox model, we tested for the assumption of proportional hazards through Schoenfeld tests, which were statistically insignificant (p value > 0.05) for all continuous covariates, except for oil prices. Statistically insignificant results confirm this assumption. To test for influential observations, Fig. 1 illustrates the deviance residuals of the covariates of interest, which are distributed around zero, helping to rule out that an overproportion of outliers reduces



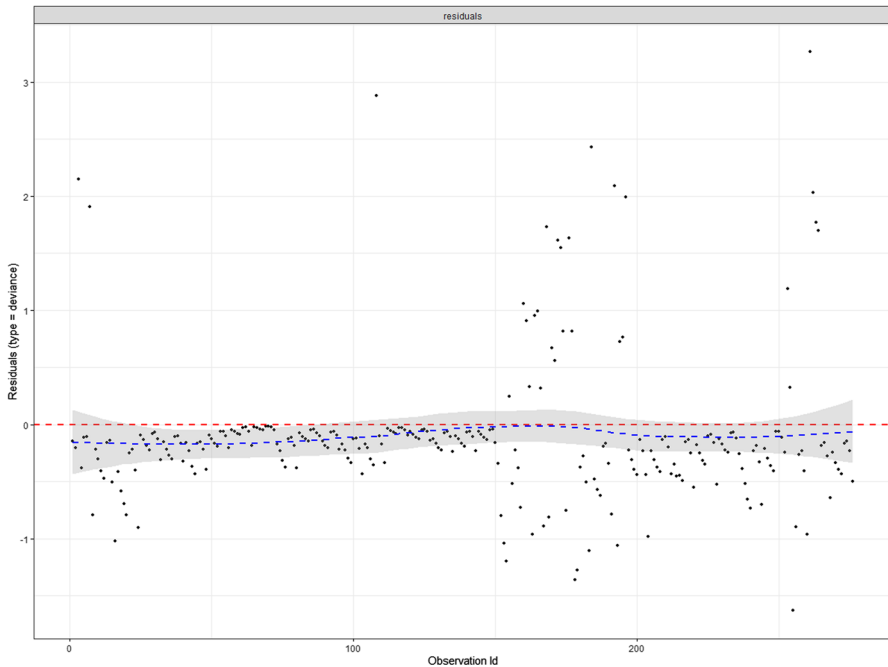


Fig. 1 Deviance residuals of the basic Cox model

the models' explanatory power.² Moreover, we tested for multicollinearity by estimating the variance inflation factor of the basic Cox model's variables, ranging from 1.32 to 2.63, precluding multicollinearity in the time series. We conducted these tests through the statistical software R, version 4.1.1, using the *simPH* and the *Companion to Applied Regressions* packages (Gandrud 2015; Fox and Weisberg 2019).

The qualitative analysis

We deploy a comparative analysis of two gatekeeper OPCs, Chad and Venezuela. This qualitative comparison allows us to process trace how the political regimes in these countries employ the policies identified in the quantitative analysis to weather the political challenges arising during economic crises. The criteria for our case selection were those gatekeeper OPCs that experienced severe economic crises and exhibited low state capacity or a combination of low and Medium–low state capacity after 2014. These criteria eliminate all possible cases but Chad and Venezuela (see Table 4).

The GDP per capita (at PPP, current USD) of Chad declined from 1820 to 1654 USD, while Venezuela's plummeted from 17,011 to 7344 USD between 2015 and

² Figure created by the authors using the *Survminer* package by Alboukadel Kassambara through the R Statistical Software, version 4.1.1.



Table 5 Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Events
Regime Change	–	–	0	1	44
Neopatrimonialism	0.673	0.266	0.010	0.983	–
International Autonomy	1.156	0.768	– 1.293	2.078	–
Economic Crisis	–	–	0	1	71
State Capacity	2.839	1.221	1	5	–
Regime Type	1.068	0.798	0	3	–
Oil Prices	81.481	27.362	43.640	111.630	–
Oil Rents	16.160	14.524	0.791	61.199	–
State Violence	0.516	0.286	0.052	0.984	–

2019 (<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/datasets/WEO> (10 May 2021)). Both cases meet a Most Different System Design as they differ in every category except for their inland oil reservoirs, relatively similar population sizes, and the historically persistent military rule since independence (Powell 2021; Bejarano 2011). Chad is a relatively young OPC, as the country joined this club in 2003 with the completion of the vital Doba-Kribi pipeline that enabled Chad to export crude oil from southern Chad through Cameroon's Gulf of Guinea (Gould and Winters 2012). Venezuela, in contrast, represents one of the oldest OPCs globally, as oil rents became the main source of governmental revenues in the 1940s (Karl 1997). Socio-economically, Chad, a landlocked African country, is one of the most underdeveloped countries globally; it exhibited during the 2010s an exceptionally low urbanisation rate of about 23%, unlike Venezuela's 88% (Colom-Jaén and Campos-Serrano 2013; <https://data.worldbank.org/> (9 Mar 2020)).

Our comparative analysis of Chad and Venezuela offers a new addition to the limited cross-regional scholarship between Africa and Latin America, small-N comparative research that has proven highly advantageous for studies of political transition and civil war (Heller 2009; Wood 2001). The sources employed for the qualitative analysis are derived from the secondary literature and descriptive statistics.

Analysing the probability of regime change in 35 major OPCs

This section presents and discusses the results of the Cox models, which estimate the probability that the covariates of interest reduce the chances of regime change in 35 major OPCs during the oil boom-bust period from 2011 to 2018.³ The hazard ratios or exponentiated coefficients below one represent a decreased probability of regime change, meaning that regime survival is more likely and vice versa. The

³ All models in Tables 6 and 7 are Cox proportional hazards models providing the exponentiated coefficient (hazard ratios) and their robust standard errors in parentheses. We created the tables with data specified in the research design section and analysed through the statistical software R, version 4.1.1, using the Survival package (Therneau and Grambsch 2000).



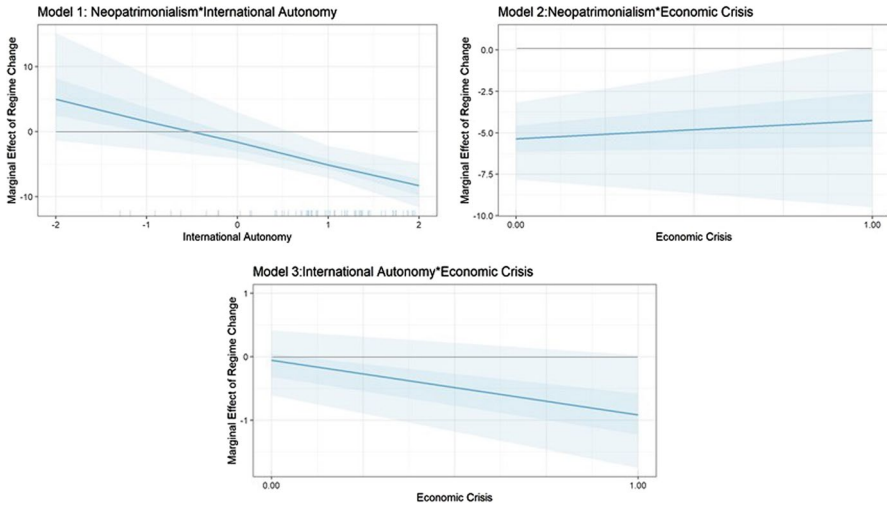


Fig. 2 Marginal effect plots for the interactions in Models 1 through 3

concordance score of all models was 0.92 or above, indicating that the models are a good fit for the data and that the models' outputs are not random guesses (Table 5).

Model 1 provides an interaction term between the neopatrimonialism and international autonomy covariates to test our main hypothesis (H1). This interaction is statistically significant, and its proportional hazards ratio is 0.03. As the difference to one is 0.97, this hazard ratio estimates that a unit increment in both covariates decreased the average probability of regime change in the analysed OPCs by 97% during the boom-bust cycle between 2011 and 2018, while the other covariates remained constant. However, adding to the complexity of interpreting interaction terms is that the outcome variable is binary, making the statistical confidence interval neither sufficient nor necessary to interpret any substantive results. Therefore, we provide marginal effects plots of each interaction term to interpret any statistical and substantive significance of each model's results by visualising whether the conditioning effect of one covariate on another is different from zero (Berry et al. 2010, 2012).⁴

Figure 2 shows the marginal effects plots of all estimated interactions. The marginal effects plot of Model 1 illustrates that a unit increase in the neopatrimonialism indicator led to a reduced probability of regime change in OPCs, at any point between 2011 and 2018, with values of international autonomy greater than 0.8, approximately. Therefore, this interaction term provides statistically significant results, as one standard deviation from international autonomy's mean (1.16) for the studied period was between 0.39 and 1.93, which indicates that about two-thirds of all observations lie in the negative marginal effect range. We can interpret from these

⁴ We created all interactions' marginal effect plots with data specified in the research design section and visualised through the statistical software R, version 4.1.1, using the simPH package (Gandrud 2015).



results that marginal increases in the neopatrimonialism and international autonomy covariates interact to reduce the probability of regime change in the 35 analysed OPCs. Hence, these results confirm our first hypothesis (H1). In other words, we find evidence to support the concept that a two-level policy coordination increases the likelihood of regime survival by reducing the probability of regime change.

Model 2 estimates the interaction between neopatrimonialism and economic crisis to test our first subsidiary hypothesis (H2). However, Model 2 shows a statistically insignificant interaction effect between neopatrimonialism and the presence of an economic crisis (when this variable's score is one), as the 95% confidence interval of the interaction term is not different from zero. This interaction is also substantively insignificant, as the mean effects of a unit increase in the neopatrimonialism indicator decrease the likelihood of regime change by about five times, irrespective of whether an OPC underwent an economic crisis. These results lead us to reject the second hypothesis.

Model 3 estimates the interaction between international autonomy and economic crisis to test our second subsidiary hypothesis (H3). Model 3 illustrates that a marginal increase in the international autonomy indicator reduces the chances of regime change when an OPC is undergoing an economic crisis. This interaction's 95% confidence interval is different from zero when the economic crisis indicator is one, indicating a statistically significant interaction and allowing us to confirm the third hypothesis. The interaction estimated above appeared statistically insignificant in Table 6 (p value = 0.14). However, a binary outcome variable means that a statistically significant p value is neither sufficient nor necessary to interpret the results and requires plotting the interaction's marginal effects (Berry et al. 2010). It is important to note that due to our relatively small sample ($N = 276$), the 95% confidence interval is broad because of large standard errors, which does not allow us to accurately interpret the probability that this interaction will reduce the chances of regime change. Nevertheless, these results point towards international policies as a key variable for OPCs to survive periods of economic decline (Table 7).

Furthermore, state capacity as a confounder was highly significant in the first three models and depicted a hazard ratio between 0.17 and 0.24, suggesting that low state capacity makes certain OPCs more susceptible to regime change. To assess the robustness of our results, we estimated in Model 4 the interaction of international autonomy and state capacity, which showed that this interaction is statistically and substantively significant after plotting its marginal effects, shown in Fig. 3. Hence, a unit increase in international autonomy when state capacity is very low—at a value of one—increases the chances of regime survival since the hazard ratio is negative. Hence, coordinating international and domestic policies to achieve regime survival appears crucial for neo-patrimonial OPCs and those with very low capacity, such as gatekeeper OPCs, as we theoretically expected.

Another theoretically relevant confounder was state violence. Individually, this confounder was statistically insignificant except in Model 1 (p value = 0.09) and showed a negative hazard ratio, meaning that increases in state violence appeared to reduce the chances of regime change. This confounder is theoretically relevant to the domestic strategy of neopatrimonialism, as states increase the use of violence when revenues to finance clientelist networks run low (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006;



Table 6 Results of the main models in 35 major OPCs, 2011-2018

	Dependent variable		
	Regime change		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Neopatrimonialism	- 1.631 (1.862)	- 5.219*** (1.354)	- 5.008*** (1.227)
International Autonomy	2.688* (1.247)	- 0.260 (0.273)	- 0.093 (0.294)
Economic Crisis	- 0.331 (0.534)	- 0.644 (2.019)	0.026 (0.516)
State Capacity	- 1.762*** (0.450)	- 1.442*** (0.386)	- 1.445*** (0.379)
Regime Type	- 0.349 (0.331)	- 0.395 (0.378)	- 0.401 (0.339)
Oil Prices	0.070*** (0.017)	0.077*** (0.017)	0.078*** (0.017)
Oil Rents	- 0.007 (0.015)	- 0.027** (0.013)	- 0.021 (0.013)
State Violence	- 2.245+ (1.339)	- 1.187 (1.258)	- 1.097 (1.256)
Neopatrimonialism*International Autonomy	- 3.484* (1.416)		
Neopatrimonialism*Economic Crisis		0.958 (2.612)	
International Autonomy*Economic Crisis			- 0.870 (0.590)
Observations	276	276	276
Concordance	0.926	0.923	0.929
Wald Test (df = 9)	62.050***	64.330***	65.230***
LR Test (df = 9)	107.766***	101.459***	103.644***
Score (Logrank) Test (df = 9)	101.654***	101.975***	100.432***

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Ross 2015). Hence, Model 5 estimates an interaction between neopatrimonialism and state violence to test our model's robustness further. This interaction's marginal effect plot shows a marginally substantive and positive interaction that departs from zero at state violence's values of 0.5 or less, meaning when state violence is high. Hence, it appears that increases in neopatrimonialism somewhat reduce the chances of regime survival when state violence is high, providing some evidence, but not conclusive, of a trade-off between the use of neo-patrimonial strategies and state violence in the analysed OPCs.

Finally, we further test the robustness of models 1 and 3 in Models 6 through 9 with two-point and four-point variations in the Polity indicator (instead of



Table 7 Results of the robustness tests models in 35 major OPCs, 2011-2018

	Dependent variable:								
	Regime Change			Regime Δ (2-point Δ)			Regime Δ (4-point Δ)		
	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(8)	(9)	(9)
Neopatrimonialism	-4.203*** (1.259)	-6.403*** (2.064)	-1.862 (1.813)	-5.086*** (1.198)	1.925 (3.849)	-2.478 (1.821)			
International Autonomy	-1.533*** (0.529)	-0.368 (0.275)	2.553* (1.197)	-0.046 (0.287)	2.972 (2.180)	0.149 (0.459)			
Economic Crisis	-0.082 (0.495)	0.158 (0.477)	-0.335 (0.524)	-0.002 (0.513)	-0.114 (1.256)	-0.242 (1.496)			
State Capacity	-2.720*** (0.800)	-1.332*** (0.374)	-1.748*** (0.430)	-1.465*** (0.366)	-1.538* (0.624)	-1.302* (0.536)			
Regime Type	-0.343 (0.338)	-0.272 (0.358)	-0.430 (0.325)	-0.488 (0.330)	-0.293 (0.520)	-0.464 (0.507)			
Oil Prices	0.076*** (0.017)	0.078*** (0.017)	0.070*** (0.017)	0.078*** (0.016)	0.134* (0.070)	0.138* (0.072)			
Oil Rents	-0.023+ (0.013)	-0.031* (0.014)	-0.009 (0.014)	-0.021 (0.013)	0.009 (0.021)	-0.003 (0.019)			
State Violence	-2.014 (1.323)	-3.242 (2.701)	-1.875 (1.289)	-0.770 (1.209)	-0.003 (2.027)	0.781 (1.931)			
International Autonomy*State Capacity	1.041*** (0.426)								
Neopatrimonialism*State Violence		3.274 (3.877)							
Neopatrimonialism*International Autonomy			-3.288* (1.364)						
International Autonomy*Economic Crisis				-0.904 (0.585)					0.103 (2.017)



Table 7 (continued)

	Dependent variable:								
	Regime Change			Regime Δ (2-point Δ)			Regime Δ (4-point Δ)		
	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(8)	(9)	
Observations	276	276	276	276	276	276	276	276	
Concordance	0.929	0.927	0.923	0.925	0.919	0.915	0.919	0.915	
Wald Test (df = 9)	67.96***	65.57***	62.20***	65.86***	14.47	14.73*	14.47	14.73*	
LR Test (df = 9)	109.16***	102.06***	106.81***	103.14***	37.51***	35.54***	37.51***	35.54***	
Score (Logrank) Test (df = 9)	126.18***	108.26***	100.75***	99.45***	30.79***	31.71***	30.79***	31.71***	

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

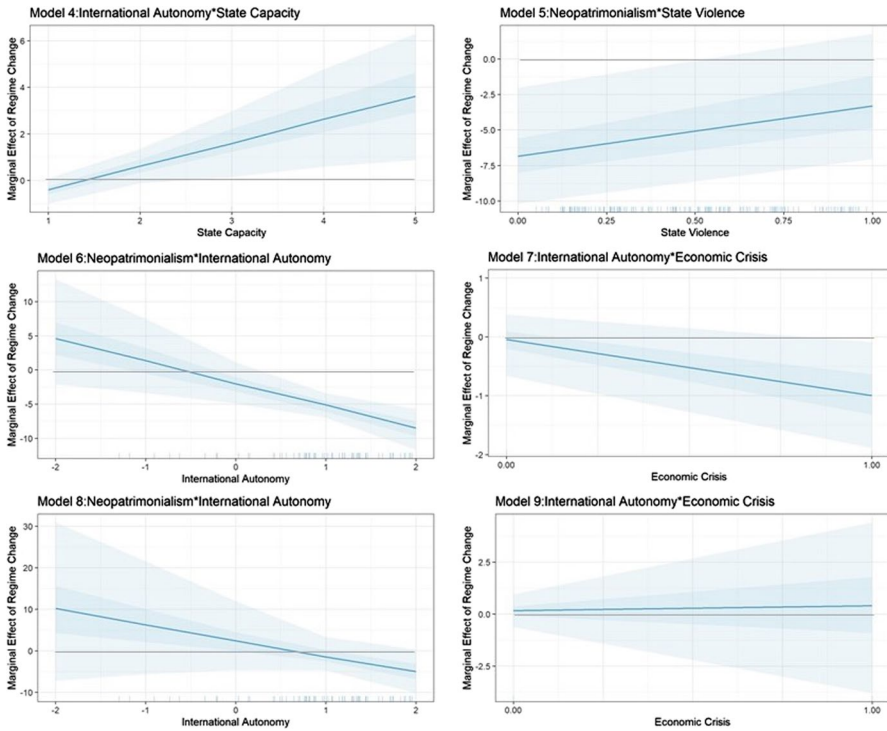


Fig. 3 Marginal effect plots for the interactions in Models 4 through 9

three-point variations) that constitute an event of regime change. The analysis of Cox models and marginal effect plots of Models 6 and 7 show very similar results to Models 1 and 3, thus showing the robustness of our results with two-point variations. However, estimating the significant main models with four-point variations, performed in Models 8 and 9, produces statistically insignificant results, thus limiting the robustness of our results. The qualitative analysis in the following section provides a more robust and nuanced test of the first and third hypotheses.

How neo-patrimonial OPCs coordinate international and domestic policies during economic crises: evidence from Chad and Venezuela

Our statistical results confirm this paper's main hypothesis that neo-patrimonial OPCs strategically coordinate their domestic and international policies during economic crises to ensure regime survival. This two-level policy calibration sees these regimes increasingly rely on their international alliances to weather internal and external challenges mounted by opponents and sustain vital clientelist mechanisms to maximise political support and executive power at home. However, these results also indicate that the mere presence of an economic crisis does not condition the effects of domestic policy (e.g., the deployment of neo-patrimonial mechanisms) to



reduce the chances of regime change. Therefore, the international policy is key for neo-patrimonial OPCs to effectively navigate this two-level game and increase the likelihood of regime survival during economic crises. This section provides a comparative qualitative analysis of the international political economy of regime survival in Chad and Venezuela, two gatekeeper OPCs, or neo-patrimonial OPCs with very low state capacity, which were particularly susceptible to domestic and international challenges during the economic downturns after the 2014 international oil price bust.

Our qualitative analysis further tests our first hypothesis by examining how the likelihood of regime survival in gatekeeper OPCs depends on a strategic balancing act of international and domestic policies. However, in this section, we further test our third hypothesis and show that during periods of economic crisis, the international strategy is determinant for regime survival and thus more substantively significant than the domestic strategy. The international strategy allows OPCs to offset their low state capacity by securing vital foreign financial, military, and diplomatic support. Specifically, the Chadian and Venezuelan regimes deepened their status quo and revisionist foreign policies to leverage geopolitical tensions and “lock in” continued support from key foreign allies to bolster their low state capacity. This strategic two-level policy coordination helped curb threats from powerful domestic and external actors under severely adverse economic conditions.

Chad: A status-quo surrogate in the Sahel

A succession of autocratic strongmen ruled Chad since independence from France in 1960 (Powell 2021). The current regime came to power after Idriss Déby deposed Hissène Habré in 1990 and just before Chad’s oil reserves started to develop for export as prices skyrocketed in 2003 (Tubiana and Debos 2017). Oil revenues provided Déby with the financial wherewithal to consolidate a regime comprised of the Chadian armed forces, the *Armée Nationale du Tchad* (ANT), his elite presidential guard, the *Direction Générale de Service de Sécurité des Institutions de l’État* (DGSSIE), and multiple allied ethnic groups (Gould and Winters 2012; Colom-Jaén and Campos-Serrano 2013; Marchal 2016). While Déby was killed unexpectedly in April 2021 during an ANT operation against rebels from the *Front pour l’alternance et la concorde au Tchad* (FACT), the Transitional Military Council chaired by his son, Mahamat Déby Itno, took over his father’s regime and has retained the complete support of key political stakeholders (<https://theconversation.com/legacy-of-chads-gatekeeper-politics-lives-on-beyond-deby-and-carries-grave-risks-160295> (4 Jan 2022)).

Déby harnessed his country’s newfound oil wealth to expand the security forces considerably while simultaneously repelling several challenges to his rule from disaffected groups. Although he was the first president in Chad’s history to hold elections, Déby’s political party, the *Mouvement Patriotique du Salut*, won consecutive electoral contests from the mid-1990s onwards due to ‘the manipulation of the electoral processes and the extensive use of repression’ (Colom-Jaén and Campos-Serrano 2013: 586). A constitutional amendment allowed Déby to seek reelection in



2006, prompting Sudan-based rebels to make successive advances on N'Djamena in 2006 and 2008, which almost overthrew his regime if not for timely French military support (Debos 2011; Pemunta and Tabenyang 2016). Facing these threats, Déby reneged on his regime's agreement with the World Bank, which placed considerable budgetary discretion on oil revenues, channelling these resources originally earmarked for health and education towards the expansion of the ANT (Gould and Winters 2012).

After the temporary defeat of his rivals, Déby established a period of calm through the clientelist redistribution of oil revenues, selectively distributing coveted positions to his supporters and opponents alike (International Crisis Group 2016). Between 2010 and 2014, his regime oversaw the growth of Chad's military and civil service while belatedly raising public spending on basic infrastructure and public services to address widespread poverty (CADH 2018; Debos 2011; International Crisis Group 2016). Nevertheless, the ANT was the main beneficiary of this clientelist spending by receiving close to one-third of the USD 13 billion in oil revenues earned between 2004 and 2015, converting Chad into a regional military power (Tubiana and Debos 2017; Gould and Winters 2012).

The 2014 oil price collapse ended this period of peace and prosperity, which, coupled with Déby's economic mismanagement, 'caused consecutive years of negative growth rates and split the country's largest source of revenue in half between 2014 and 2016' (Eizenga 2018: 11). Déby had borrowed heavily before the oil decline, a fiscal position that only worsened during the crisis, with Chad's gross debt as a share of GDP expanding from 39.5 to 49% between 2014 and 2018 ((https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/G_XWDG_G01_GDP_PT@FM/TCD (06 Aug 2021)). In addition, the Chadian regime streamlined domestic rent deployment to weather the crisis by drastically reducing public spending. These austerity measures provoked nationwide protests and strikes, particularly before and after the heavily manipulated 2016 presidential election, which Déby unsurprisingly won (CADH 2018; Marchal 2016; Pemunta and Tabenyang 2016). Following the new constitution's approval in 2018, further consolidating Déby's power, he again won a deeply flawed election in April 2021, days before his death (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/chad-holds-another-sham-election> (4 Jan 2022)).

Even though Déby's regime reduced public spending to offset the loss in state revenue, it was careful not to cut military budgets. Prioritising the loyalty of the security forces over struggling popular sectors, Déby diversified the ANT by promoting officers from various regional and ethnic backgrounds to top-ranking positions while recruiting thousands of new troops (Tubiana and Debos 2017). Beyond the ANT, Déby reconfigured the power centres within his regime by expanding the DGSSIE, led by one of his sons and two nephews (Marchal 2016). Déby also gave cabinet positions and public contracts to his numerous family members to 'fill his government with allies, bridge ethnic divides, and control Chad's key industries' (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/01/boko-haram-islamist-terrorists-strike-chad-while-world-distracted-by-coronavirus/> (1 July 2020)). Additionally, Déby awarded control of alternative revenue sources, such as control of lucrative trade routes with Cameroon and Nigeria and informal gold mining in Tibesti, to members of the security services to ensure their continued loyalty (International Crisis Group 2019a).



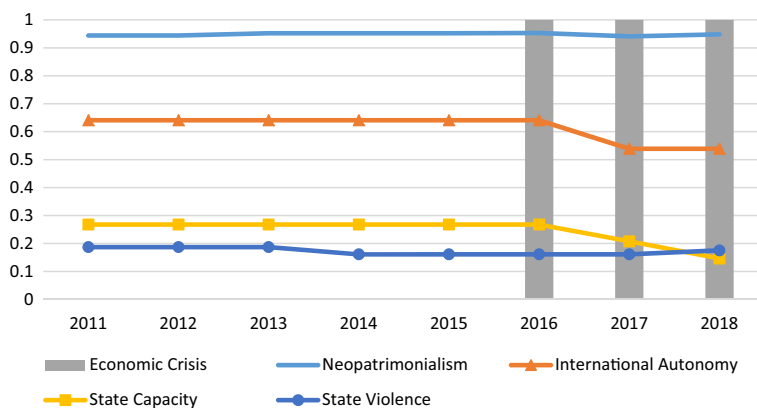


Fig. 4 Descriptive statistics of key variables for Chad

In doing so, Déby maintained the regime's high degree of neopatrimonialism while offsetting the declining state capacity that resulted from the oil price bust, illustrated in Fig. 4.⁵

More than streamlining rent deployment or diversifying revenue streams, Déby's ability to leverage his country's strong ties with key status-quo powers such as France and the United States enabled his regime to weather the economic crisis beyond his death. The expansion of the ANT and the DGSSIE at this juncture served to buttress Déby's position at home. They raised Chad's geopolitical status in the region as 'a strategic outpost for France and the United States in the fight against Islamist militants across the Sahel and Boko Haram in Nigeria' (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chads-strategic-interest-france-western-allies-2021-04-20/> (4 Jan 2022)). Beyond the jihadist threat, China and Russia's regional footprint has grown considerably during this period, raising the value of Chad's loyalty to its key Western allies even further, particularly considering the Malian coup d'État in 2021, which effectively saw Bamako replace French troops with Russian military contractors to combat Islamic extremists in the Sahel (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/west-africa/2022-03-10/macrons-mess-sahel> (19 April 2022)). Using this dynamic to his advantage, Déby secured continued military, economic, and diplomatic support from foreign allies to help defeat various domestic challenges to his rule while silencing any potential international criticism about human rights violations, electoral fraud, and extreme corruption (Tubiana and Debos 2017; International Crisis Group 2016). This international strategy slightly compromised Chad's international autonomy after 2016 but allowed the Déby regime to leverage its geopolitical positioning to compensate for its reduced state capacity.

After the 2014 oil price bust, the Chadian regime received emergency loans and considerable debt relief from the IMF and the World Bank, economic assistance that has helped Déby's regime overcome the worst effects of the economic crisis, as the

⁵ Figure created by the authors. We transformed the international autonomy and state capacity variables to coefficients for visualisation purposes.



national economy showed modest recovery signs after 2018 (<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/datasets/FM/1> (12 June 2020); Marchal 2016). Of equal importance, Déby's foreign allies have provided him with substantial military support to help protect his regime from domestic rivals seeking to overthrow him (<https://theconversation.com/legacy-of-chads-gatekeeper-politics-lives-on-beyond-deby-and-carries-grave-risks-160295> (4 Jan 2022)). Tellingly, the FACT rebel incursion credited with killing Déby had reportedly been trained and received support from Moscow-backed Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/world/africa/idriss-deby-chad-obituary.html> (5 Jan 2022)).

Since Chad's independence, France retained considerable influence over its former African colonies and viewed Chad as an indispensable military ally to combat threats in the Sahel posed by Islamist insurgents (Marchal 2016). From 2013 onwards, Chad contributed thousands of troops to two French-led military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic. These deployments successfully protected both incumbent governments from Islamist militant groups, forcing then-French president François Hollande to maintain support for Déby's autocratic regime despite his previous reservations (Chafer 2019). The following year, France launched Operation Barkhane to combat foreign jihadist groups in northern Mali and established its main base of operations in N'Djamena. In return, Déby committed thousands of Chadian troops to multilateral missions in Mali, the Lake Chad Basin, and the regional counterterrorism group, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, in the following years (Eizenga 2018; International Crisis Group 2017, 2019a).

France, in turn, rewarded Déby for his commitment to combatting Islamist extremism in the Sahel with a robust security guarantee that included using its air force to attack rebel convoys inside of Chadian territory (<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/chad-frances-role-and-political-instability-23842> (5 Jan 2022)). Apart from the thousands of French troops permanently stationed at Operation Barkhane's main base in N'Djamena, France also maintains two other forward operating bases to monitor potential threats emanating from Libya, Sudan, and the Central African Republic, incidentally three countries where Russia has increased its presence (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chads-strategic-interest-france-western-allies-2021-04-20/> (4 Jan 2022)). Beyond the battlefield, Paris has gone so far as to freeze the financial assets of Déby's political rivals to placate its Sahelian ally (Tubiana and Debos 2017).

However, the French security guarantee has locked successive presidents into the survival of Déby's regime. As Marchal notes, 'France is a prisoner of its relations with Chad, more than Chad is a prisoner of its relations with France' (<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/chad-frances-role-and-political-instability-23842> (5 Jan 2022)). Tellingly, President Macron attended Déby's state funeral in N'Djamena and sat next to the late president's son and successor, Mahamat Déby (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/23/chad-holds-presidential-funeral-despite-rebel-threat> (16 Aug 2021)).

While the United States lacks France's colonial baggage in Chad, it has nevertheless been drawn into its internal affairs due to geopolitics, oil, and Islamist extremism's recent rise in the Sahel. Chad is strategically located 'at the crossroads of most major conflicts in Africa where the United States currently has a security interest, if



not an actual operational presence,' simultaneously representing 'a good opportunity for Russia, both to harm Western interests and to gain access to West and Central Africa' (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/washingtons-role-and-responsibility-in-chad/> (7 Jan 2022); <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/how-russia-could-capitalise-chads-instability> (6 Jan 2022)). Over the past decade, Déby's regime strengthened its ties with Washington by actively combatting jihadists in the Sahel and, more importantly, in those countries located in the Gulf of Guinea where American companies have substantial investments in the energy sector.

From 2015 onwards, the Chadian military has played a central role in dislodging Boko Haram from strategic spaces in Northern Nigeria and has leveraged this role to 'gain support and recognition from Western nations' (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/29/the-death-of-chadian-president-idris-deby-itno-threatens-stability-in-the-region/> (4 Jan 2022); <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chad-holds-another-sham-election> (7 Jan 2022)). Previous American presidents viewed the Sahel largely as France's domain, yet 'Washington's regional security interests are now equally as bound to what unfolds in Chad' (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/washingtons-role-and-responsibility-in-chad/> (7 Jan 2022)). Moreover, the United States views Déby's regime as an indispensable counterterror ally, with Chad playing host to several American military advisors and military installations that are central to the U.S. military's Africa Command's (AFRICOM) deployments on the continent (<https://theintercept.com/2018/12/01/u-s-military-says-it-has-a-light-footprint-in-africa-these-documents-show-a-vast-network-of-bases/> (5 Jan 2022); <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chads-strategic-interest-france-western-allies-2021-04-20/> (4 Jan 2022)).

Beyond Chad's traditional alliances with status-quo powers, Déby demonstrated strategic flexibility by brokering new alliances to support his embattled regime after 2014. In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pledged millions of dollars in military assistance towards Chadian counterterror operations in the Greater Sahel, while Déby simultaneously re-established diplomatic ties with Israel in exchange for arms and security cooperation against Islamist extremists (<https://de.reuters.com/article/uk-chad-israel-rapprochement-idUKKCN1PE0OW> (3 Aug 2020)). Beyond state actors, the Chadian regime also fortified alliances with transnational ethnic groups present in Chad's border regions with Sudan, Libya, Niger, and the Central African Republic to deter any potential challenges originating in Chad's expansive and vulnerable peripheral regions (Tubiana and Debos 2017).

Venezuela: a revisionist challenger in the Americas

While oil rents paved the way for Venezuela's democratic transition from 1958 onwards, the quality of the country's democratic institutions and oil productivity began to decline after the mid-1970s, following the nationalisation of Venezuela's oil industry with the creation of *Petróleos de Venezuela, SA* (PDVSA) in 1976 (Karl 1997). The 1998 election of former military officer Hugo Chávez only accelerated the country's democratic backsliding further. Under the new regime, the Venezuelan military, or the *Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana* (FANB), became a key



stakeholder, and Chávez was able to further consolidate his power after surviving a failed coup, a nationwide strike, and a recall referendum between 2002 and 2004 (Corrales and Penfold 2015).

Chávez forged a regime that was ‘a marriage of radicals and officers’ (Corrales 2014: 371), a mix of the FANB and civilian activists hailing from pre-existing left-wing political parties and labour unions. Confronted by an ineffective political opposition, he gradually converted Venezuela into a competitive authoritarian OPC by removing virtually all checks and balances on executive power (Corrales and Penfold 2015). This democratic regression was made possible due to the oil boom between 2004 and 2014, as oil-financed clientelist public spending and mechanisms of oil rent multiplication, such as currency exchange and capital controls, ensured a majoritarian electoral base through the formation of the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV) in 2007 (Lupien 2015; Hawkins 2016). Since 2013, Nicolás Maduro, handpicked by Chávez just before his death, has led Venezuela and oversaw Venezuela’s transition from a competitive authoritarian to a fully authoritarian OPC.

The ascendance of Nicolas Maduro in 2013 coincided with the decline of PSUV’s electoral appeal, rapidly declining oil production, and the international oil price bust of 2014, all of which forced the *Chavista* regime to severely streamline rent deployment to popular sectors (Bahar et al. 2018). As a result, the regime scaled back non-excludable subsidies of basic goods and services and distributed dwindling resources to key political loyalists instead, leading to a dramatic rise in food insecurity and the annual inflation rate skyrocketing from 62% in 2014 to a crippling 65,000% in 2018, a key factor behind the recent mass exodus of millions of Venezuelans from their country (Larratt-Smith and Leon 2022; <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/datasets/FM/1> (12 June 2020)).

Deprived of the necessary state resources to maintain its majoritarian electoral base, the ruling PSUV lost control of the legislative branch for the first time in 2015, ceding two-thirds of seats to the opposition party coalition in an unprecedented electoral rejection of *chavismo*. Consequently, the Maduro regime enacted multiple measures that created numerous obstacles to any meaningful future electoral competition (Corrales 2020). Furthermore, Maduro’s regime reacted to mounting public discontent by deploying the security forces to quell these mass mobilisations forcefully (Leon 2022). The opposition-controlled legislature launched a campaign in January 2019 to remove Maduro from office by claiming that the legislative leader, Juan Guaidó, was the legitimate president. These controversial efforts garnered substantial support from international status-quo powers in the form of diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions (<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-military/> (2 July 2019)).

Despite these severe measures, the Maduro regime has managed to weather the ensuing turbulence and retain firm control of executive power by streamlining domestic rent deployment to key allies and diversifying those nodal points connecting the country’s economy to the outside world. To guarantee the continued support of the FANB after the onset of the economic crisis, Maduro has dramatically increased the number of generals in the military and replaced many longstanding civilian stalwarts of the *Chavista* regime in prominent cabinet positions and state-owned industries with these military officials (<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/>



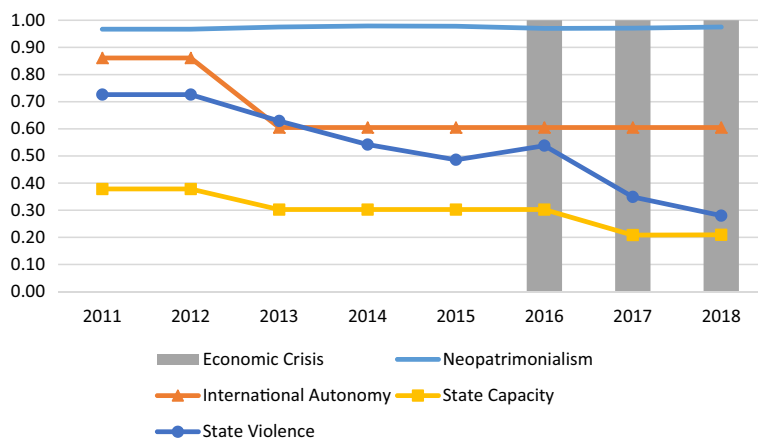


Fig. 5 Descriptive statistics of key variables for Venezuela

[special-report/venezuela-military/](#) (2 July 2019)). Furthermore, Maduro has permitted and even encouraged the development of alternative revenue sources, including illicit drug trafficking, gasoline smuggling, and gold mining in natural reserves, to compensate for declining state revenues and to keep rents flowing to the regime's key stakeholders (Polga-Hecimovich 2019; International Crisis Group 2019b). In 2015, the Obama administration imposed targeted sanctions on elite Venezuelan policymakers accused of drug trafficking and human rights violations (<https://www.wola.org/analysis/venezuela-sanctions-takeaways/> (9 April 2020)). These punitive measures worsened considerably from 2019 onwards, as the Trump administration imposed a series of wide-ranging sanctions against the Venezuelan oil industry in conjunction with the political opposition's unsuccessful campaign to force Maduro from power (<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-military/> (2 July 2019)).

However, the incumbent Venezuelan government has largely survived these domestic and international challenges due to its crucial foreign alliances that share revisionist ambitions on the global stage. Under Chávez's watch, Venezuela dramatically redrew its foreign policy by distancing itself from the United States while simultaneously developing greater ties to regional and international revisionist states seeking to promote a multipolar international system such as China, Cuba, Russia, and Iran (Rouvinski 2021; Oner 2021; Fonseca and Polga-Hecimovich 2021; Kaplan and Penfold 2021). This geopolitical realignment drastically escalated the *Chavista* regime's conflict with the United States and other status-quo countries. This dynamic has only intensified under Maduro, as Venezuela has deepened ties with key revisionist allies, an alignment that has proven mutually beneficial for all. For Maduro's regional and international partners, Venezuela has continued to provide a strategic counterbalance to the United States and its allies throughout the Americas. As in the Chadian case, the international strategy of leveraging geopolitical rivalries



meant a slight loss of international autonomy, shown in Fig. 5.⁶ Nevertheless, the benefits of these revisionist alliances have helped the regime overcome its increased isolation in the region and beyond, enabling Maduro to remain in power through access to foreign loans and vital transfers of repressive expertise.

In the face of a massive economic contraction, Venezuela's allies served as a crucial source of foreign capital, especially given the historically poor relations between *chavismo* and mainstream international lending institutions. Between 2014 and 2018, the Maduro regime sought international loans to make up for dwindling oil revenues to continue financing its clientelism mechanisms at home. During this period, Venezuela's gross debt position as a share of GDP expanded from 25 to 181%, much of this coming in the form of loans from economically powerful allies such as China and Russia ((https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/G_XWDG_G01_GDP_PT@FM/VEN (06 Aug 2021)). Ironically, by deepening Venezuela's economic dependence on key revisionist partners abroad, Maduro has also locked these superpowers into their bilateral commitments to his beleaguered regime to guarantee their eventual repayment. While China and Russia have substantial geopolitical motives to support a revisionist state so close to American soil, given their rivalries with the United States, both countries are also clearly looking to protect their substantial investments in Venezuela.

In the early 2010s, Venezuela accounted for 64% of Chinese foreign direct investment in Latin America, yet the increasingly macroeconomic instability under Maduro has forced Beijing to reconsider its financial ties there. However, billions of dollars in Chinese loans underwritten with PDVSA futures as collateral hindered China's attempts to reduce its exposure in Venezuela, thereby binding Beijing to the survival of Maduro's regime. Kaplan and Penfold (2021: 98) note: 'China was entangled by a creditor trap in Venezuela, much more than Venezuela was caught in a debt trap by China.' As such, China has remained 'the Maduro government's primary economic lifeline' throughout the economic crisis, an enormously risky political and economic commitment for the Chinese government, but one that gives it greater influence in the Americas to strategically serve 'as a counterweight to US influence in East Asia (especially Southeast Asia)' (Ferchen 2020: 12, 16).

Apart from China, Russia finds itself ensnared in a similar creditor trap with Venezuela, having provided Caracas with 20 billion USD in loans whose eventual repayment is tied to the Maduro regime's continued survival. Furthermore, the Russian energy consortium Rosneft became increasingly involved in producing and distributing Venezuelan oil in recent years until this commercial relationship ended abruptly in 2020 due to direct US sanctions. Despite these mounting difficulties, Putin's government is unwilling to lose its investment or abandon an ally that provides Russia with a foothold in the Americas (Rouvinski 2021). Of equal importance, Russia (along with China and Iran) have drawn on their own extensive experiences countering American economic power and has helped the Maduro regime circumvent cumbersome US sanctions over the past three years (Rendon and Fernandez 2020).

⁶ See note 5.



Apart from financial support, Maduro's international allies have provided a wealth of repressive expertise and diplomatic support to offset the mounting internal and external challenges due to its weakened state capacity. Venezuela's state capacity was already in decline when Maduro came to power, but the further collapse of state capacities after an oil price bust due to the economy's overdependency on oil rents was foreseeable (Freije 2014). Since the failed 2002 coup against Chávez, the Cuban intelligence service has helped to revamp the Venezuelan intelligence services, particularly the military counterintelligence agency (Ginter 2013). Under Maduro, intelligence cooperation with Cuba has continued in exchange for oil payments, as 'intelligence and counterintelligence—likely provided by both Venezuelan and Cuban personnel—are particularly important for the president to snuff out threats to his power' from within the military and civilian politicians allied with or opposing the regime (Fonseca and Polga-Hecimovich 2021: 122). The mutual dependency between Cuba and Venezuela has only deepened under Maduro's watch, as the former 'has arguably done more than any other state to secure Maduro's grasp on power,' even though Cuba remains 'so dependent on Venezuela that the possibility of a political transition there represents an existential threat to the Castro regime' (Rendon and Fernandez 2020: 7).

Similarly, the Putin regime staunchly backed Maduro during the ongoing crisis by supplying him with military advisors, private contractors, and S-300 surface-to-air missiles in response to the escalation of US support for the Venezuelan opposition since 2019. Russia's actions are a show of support for its revisionist South American ally that 'intends to demonstrate Moscow's great power reach, thwart US policy in its hemisphere, and underscore that a multipolar world will replace the era of American predominance' (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russias-intervention-in-venezuela-whats-at-stake/> (28 July 2020). Russia does not possess the financial wherewithal to sustain the Venezuelan regime on its own. Yet, its continued political, economic, and military support suggests that Venezuela has leveraged its geostrategic value to Moscow to the extent that Russia is 'the only major external power not willing to consider a post-Maduro Venezuela' (Rouvinski 2021: 45).

In the interim, Venezuela's government has also developed new alliances with states seeking to challenge the status quo international order in exchange for loans, repressive expertise, support to circumvent American sanctions, and developing alternative non-oil-based revenue streams that proved crucial to maintaining the inner regime's cohesion. For example, since 2016, Maduro and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have developed closer ties based on their mutual suspicion of the United States. During this period, 'Turkey has emerged as the linchpin of the Venezuelan gold trade, providing Maduro with a much-needed source of revenue at a time of shrinking oil revenues and comprehensive US sanctions' (Oner 2021: 174; Rendon and Fernandez 2020). Additionally, Maduro has increased dependence on revisionist armed non-state allies to augment its' increasingly weakening territorial control in the Venezuelan periphery. Over the past decade, the Venezuelan government has developed close ties with two Colombian insurgent groups, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) and the *Segunda Marquetalia* FARC dissident faction. These relationships provided these foreign guerrillas with a strategic refuge



in Venezuela while allowing Maduro to counterbalance the Colombian government, a staunch US ally and one of his biggest regional opponents (Larratt-Smith 2021).

Conclusion

Our quantitative findings confirm that neo-patrimonial OPCs survive prolonged economic crises by skilfully calibrating their domestic and international policies, although the latter is key to their ability to weather these turbulent boom-bust cycles. At home, embattled regimes depend on clientelist mechanisms to secure the loyalty of key actors and elite groups to stave off domestic and international challenges during periods of prosperity and stagnation. Nevertheless, during severe economic crises, when resources are scarce, and pressures begin to mount, the need for neo-patrimonial OPCs to secure crucial aid from foreign allies becomes particularly acute. Our quantitative analysis found that increasing international autonomy during economic crises increases the chances of regime survival. However, our qualitative analysis provided important nuance. The ability of neo-patrimonial OPCs to navigate international geopolitics and leverage global fault lines ultimately determines their survival or collapse. Hence, Chad and Venezuela, two gatekeeper OPCs, slightly compromised their international autonomy during the post-2014 economic crisis, allowing their regimes to survive diverse challenges to their power.

Our qualitative comparative analysis of Chad and Venezuela demonstrates the importance of the ‘two-level game’ between domestic politics and the international sphere. In contrast to what much of the International Relation’s literature suggests, our analysis shows that these two gatekeeper OPCs are far from passive actors in international politics. Rather, they leverage their geopolitical alignment, whether status-quo or revisionist, and positioning in the international order to extract the necessary financial, military, and diplomatic support from their allies to bolster domestic capacities. This timely assistance ultimately enables these beleaguered regimes to stave off domestic and international challenges to their rule, which inevitably arise when resources run low, adversely impacting rent deployment.

Incumbent rulers in Chad and Venezuela responded to the 2014 international oil price bust by prioritising the redistribution of scarce state resources to elite groups capable of staving off coups, revolutions, and external interventions (e.g., the security services). Beyond these measures, the Déby and Maduro regimes leveraged their international allies’ geopolitical conflicts to their benefit to access the foreign capital and military support required to offset their deteriorating state capacity. Echoing recent works on hegemonic power alliances, Chad’s geopolitical alignment with status-quo powers appears to have proven more beneficial than Venezuela’s with revisionist ones. Hopefully, future research will further explore this topic on OPCs and international geopolitical alliances.

This article contributes to the rich literature on authoritarian resilience and cross-regional studies of resource-rich countries in the Global South (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Smith 2006). Our findings offer two analytically promising yet understudied avenues of exploration for scholars of Comparative Politics, International Development, and International Relations. First, the



existing scholarship on OPCs generally focuses on the political economy of rentierism and authoritarianism. However, there is a demonstrable need to examine further the variation between democratic and autocratic regimes in the wider universe of cases and analyse the dramatic differences between authoritarian OPCs, an important distinction that we have highlighted in this work. Second, International Relations studies of status-quo and revisionist states generally limit their scope to great powers in the international system (Chan et al. 2019; Cooley et al. 2021; Casey 2020). As the cases of Chad and Venezuela demonstrate, the geopolitical alignment of low-capacity states similarly has profound effects, both positive and negative, on regional stability while also playing a key role in promoting or opposing hegemonic projects such as the prohibitive international regime against illicit drugs or the global campaign against Islamist extremist groups.

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