

Table 1

Cross Correlations for 2018

	Legislative Power	Political Freedom	Economic Freedom
Legislative Power	1		
Political Freedom	0.6452	1	
Economic Freedom	0.5369	0.5014	1

The consolidation of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa has been uneven. During the past 20 years, the “freedom status”¹ of 29 countries remained largely unchanged, with 10 countries classified as “not free,” 12 countries as “partially free,” and seven countries as “free” (Freedom House 2018).

Like democratization, legislative development in Africa has been uneven. Barkan (2009) pointed out that whereas African legislatures remain weak relative to the executive, most are more powerful and autonomous now than at any time since independence—and a small number have become institutions of countervailing power vis-à-vis the executive.

It is not surprising, then, that countries considered as “Liberal Democracies” or “Aspiring Democracies” by Freedom House (2018) also have the strongest legislatures according to Fish and Kroenig (2009). Furthermore, Pelizzo and Baris (2015) found that political stability, lower corruption, stronger enforcement of the rule of law, and policy continuity were associated with better oversight and more accountable governments.

In general, this statement holds: there is a strong association among democracies, legislatures, and economic freedom.

But is there association among stronger democracy, stronger legislatures, and better economic policies? We examine the various relationships among legislative power, democracy, and economic liberalization. Looking first at Fish and Kroenig’s (2009) index of legislative power and the most recent data on political freedom (Freedom House 2018), we found a strong correlation of 0.6452, supporting Fish’s (2006) contention that stronger legislatures equal stronger democracy. There also is a moderate correlation between stronger democracies and more liberal economic policies and greater economic freedom (0.5014), as well as between legislative oversight and economic freedom (0.5369) (table 1).

There are significant outliers. Both Lindberg and Zhou (2009) and Staphenurst and Pelizzo (2012) highlighted Ghana’s democratization as one of the political success stories in Africa. At the same time, however, its legislative power is weak and possibly becoming weaker (Draman 2018). Conversely, Rwanda has a low score regarding political freedom but a relatively high score in terms of legislative power—reflecting perhaps President Kagame’s tight control of power but encouragement of policy debate within parliament.

In short, as Africa has moved beyond colonial authoritarianism, some countries have seen further political liberalization whereas others remain stuck in single-party states or under another form of authoritarianism. In general, this statement holds: there is a

strong association among democracies, legislatures, and economic freedom. However, given significant outliers, more research at both the regional and the country levels is required to better understand these relationships. ■

NOTE

1. As measured by Freedom House, which ranks countries as “free,” “partially free,” or “not free.”

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CONCLUSION: TOWARD A THEORY OF LEGISLATIVE DECLINE

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From Moscow to Washington, DC, from Beijing to Ankara, there has been growth in executive power and the increasing inability of national legislatures to check the executive. Although the contributions in this spotlight focus largely on newer democratic or hybrid systems, as Charles Wise suggests in the introduction, many of these trends toward the weakening of legislative checks on the executive are also in evidence even in the more “consolidated” Western democracies. These contributions begin to formulate a theoretical framework to understand the general global trend toward the empowerment of executives at the expense of national legislatures.

The cases included were selected to represent a diverse sample of developing democracies, ranging from newer democracies emerging from the post-communist world (in both Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union) to more established but at times fragile developmental democracies in Asia (i.e., Turkey, India, and Bangladesh). The cases are different from one another but, in many ways, by using a most-different systems design, the spotlight investigates the various causes for a similar outcome—that is, the weakening of the national legislature relative to the

national executive. The exception is among the African cases, where the legislatures have seemingly held their own.

What explains the inability of national legislatures to check the growth of executive power? Building on the introductory article by Charles Wise, the contributions in this spotlight point to seven sets of factors that have explained the erosion of legislative power: historical legacies, institutional design, economic factors, external factors, political polarization, personalization of politics, and happenstance.

Historical Legacies

As William Crowther notes in his comparative examination of Macedonia and Moldova, when a country does not have a historical legacy of political independence and democracy, it tends to impede legislative development. This is because newly independent states generally lack institutionalized governmental structures (inviting the dominance of political personalities). Furthermore, countries that lack experience with issues of representation and free elections are less likely to develop institutionalized legislatures. This perspective can be extended further by reference to other literature, particularly the work of Ishiyama (1997), Kitschelt (1995), and—to some extent—Bratton and Van de Walle (1997) that suggests that the previous authoritarian regime legacy crucially impacts post-transition politics. Thus, for instance, the legacy of the communist past—in the cases of Macedonia and Moldova, the “patrimonial communist legacy”—is more inimical to building strong legislatures that could check executives than the “national consensus legacies” of other post-communist systems (e.g., Hungary and Poland). The effects of previous authoritarian regime legacies also can be extended to Africa.

Institutional Design

Several articles point to the importance of political institutions in affecting the relationship between the legislature and the executive. Indeed, this relates directly to the long-standing literature in the field that examines institutional design on politics (Lijphart 1999; Shugart and Carey 1992; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). This includes both the general constitutional design and the internal rules governing parliament. For instance, Irina Khmelko and Oleksii Bruslyk contend that the initial design of a strong presidential system in Russia and a more mixed system in Ukraine, coupled with the use of different electoral laws, contributed to the weakness of the Russian legislature, whereas Ukraine has been more successful in checking executive authority. Their contribution echoes concerns expressed about adopting a presidential system by Linz (1990).

In addition to the basic institutional features of the constitutional order, there are rules governing the inner workings of parliaments that impact the relationship between the executive and the legislature. Thus, Monika Nalepa argues that despite the adoption of national political institutions that should have provided effective checks on executive power, they failed to do so. This is because of the use of internal parliamentary rules by the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) Party to strengthen party discipline and to shut out the opposition, thereby strengthening the position of the executive. Similarly, in his contribution about Turkey, Omer Faruk Gençkaya highlights the fact that individual legislators lack the resources to effectively oversee the executive's operations, which also weakens the institutional capacity to contain the executive.

Economic Factors

Economic factors also contribute to the strengthening of the executive. As Acemoglu and Robinson (2001) and Przeworski et al. (2000) noted, economic conditions directly impact democracy and, presumably, the ability of the legislature to check the executive. Drago Zajc suggests that parliaments are particularly susceptible to economic downturns, and economic shocks undermine a parliament's ability to check the executive. Faced with crisis, executives in Slovenia expanded their powers using fast-track legislation, which weakened the National Assembly's ability to check cabinet actions.

Another key economic factor is privatization and economic reform. In this respect, privatization (even after shock therapy in countries such as Poland) did not check the growth of the executive. As Charles Wise suggests in the introduction, much of this economic reform—particularly in post-communist Europe—also was accompanied by a growing corruption and the discrediting of “normal politics,” particularly undermining legislative authority.

Conversely, privatization had a *positive* impact in Africa. Although legislatures are relatively weak compared to the executive in Africa, in some cases they have become effective challengers to executive dominance. In part, as Rick Stapenhurst and Isabelle Côté suggest, this is related to greater economic liberalization. Although the causal logic is not entirely clear, perhaps the dismantling of parastatals and privatization of the economy has undermined the executive's monopoly on economic resources, thereby providing oppositions and individual legislators the resources to check the executive. These themes echo the work of Arriola (2012), who argued that privatization in Africa led to the loosening of monopolistic control of state resources by governing parties, strengthening the opposition, and—as a result—the ability of the legislature to check the executive.

Whatever the case, privatization did not prevent the expansion of executive power in post-communist Europe but did so in Africa. Perhaps the way in which privatization occurred is key to the explanation for the difference, but this requires further comparative investigation.

External Factors

External forces also impact the strengthening of the executive. For William Crowther, the lack of democratic neighbors (which exemplify legislative checks on the executive) certainly impacted the development of politics in Moldova, a theme that echoes earlier work on democratic diffusion (Huntington 1993). Furthermore, particularly in Europe, integration of the post-communist states created added pressures for the strengthening of the executive. Thus, many scholars noted the effects of Europeanization on the weakening of political oppositions and affecting the ability of parties to offer competing policy objectives (due to EU membership requirements), thereby weakening the role of legislative parties (Kitschelt 1994; Ladrech 2002). Furthermore, Drajo Zajc and Adam Szymański suggest that EU accession also strengthened executive authority, particularly because of the use “fast-track legislative procedures” to meet EU requirements.

Political Polarization

An additional (and more recent) factor that has impacted the growing strength of the executive has been the emergence of “zero sum” polarized politics. Scholars including Linz (1990) argued

that systems that created strong executives promote “zero sum politics”; however, several contributions in this spotlight suggest a reverse causal relationship. As several contributors noted, polarization of politics has led to the strengthening of the executive as the governing party seeks to exclude the opposition from power. But what has led to this growing polarization of

by the case of Slovenia). Second, globalization has led to a greater sense of cultural-identity threat, which has resulted in greater polarization over the nature of the state. Polarization and zero-sum politics weaken the institution that is designed for deliberation: the national legislature (illustrated by India, Poland, and Hungary).

Is there a “global trend” that can be derived from the findings presented in this spotlight? If there is a trend, it is that globalization is leading to the weakening of national legislatures and increasing national executive power.

politics? Based on the case of India, Miland Thakar suggests that polarization has emerged because of a fundamental shift in the political debate. Thus, political debate is no longer about policy, about the nature of the state—that is, whether the state is monocultural or ethnic as opposed to civic. In ways similar to Poland and Hungary (as well as in Western countries), the resulting polarization of politics over the nature of the state has led to a weakening of the institution that is designed for deliberation: the legislature.

Personalization of Politics

Miland Thakar also points to the role that mass media, particularly electronic media, has played in promoting “political theater,” which has benefited executives far more than legislators. Indeed, the personalization of politics is advantageous to those who can most intensely engage in social media, and executives are far better at starring in their theatrical role than legislators.

Happenstance

Finally, as Ali Riaz points out in his article on Bangladeshi politics, sometimes the strengthening of the executive happens because of mistakes made by the opposition, particularly in this era of political polarization. For instance, he points out that the boycott of an election by the opposition parties allowed the governing party to effectively establish a one-party parliament, thereby strengthening the position of the executive relative to the legislature as the latter deferred to the actions of the government.

Is there a “global trend” that can be derived from the findings presented in this spotlight? If there is a trend, it is that globalization is leading to the weakening of national legislatures and increasing national executive power. Two causal mechanisms can be identified for this trend. First, globalization and economic integration now require quicker reactions to changing events, which legislatures are not equipped to do (illustrated

In summary, contributions to this spotlight together represent an important first step in identifying key factors that explain the global move toward the strengthening of executives at the expense of national legislatures. From these discussions, testable theoretical propositions about the growing imbalance between executives and national legislatures can be developed, thereby moving the field toward a promising new research agenda. ■

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