

Hypothetical Political Legitimacy Exercise

Rank these hypothetical political regimes according to your opinion from “Best” (or “strongest legitimacy”) to “Worst” (“weakest legitimacy or illegitimate”). You are allowed to say that they’re all equal or that you can’t judge them for any reason, but that would not be very interesting for discussion. Which (if any) do you think are likely to survive the next 10-20 years, which (if any) will fall in 10-20 years, and are your answers to this question exactly the same as your legitimacy rankings? In which would you yourself most like or dislike being a national citizen/subject, and why?

A. A liberal (Western) democracy with secular governance in a non-Western and highly religious country with rule of law and low corruption but a so-so economy (slow GDP growth for decades). The society is highly divided (polarized and partisan as a result of competition between political parties), and there are street protests in the capital almost every day. It is a parliamentary system, and radical parties on both the left and right wings have been gaining seats in parliament for every election in the past decade. Having been educated in the USA, the current prime minister is culturally distant and now prefers to speak English rather than the local language. Citizens don’t trust his white, American wife, though she may attract economic and military aid from the USA. Indeed, the USA keeps a large military base in this country.

B. The sole party is designated as a terrorist organization by both China and the USA, not recognized by the majority of nations at the UN, militarily strong and with strong traditional Weberian & ideological support as a theocracy. The media system is closed, and it is illegal to criticize religious leaders. The economy is OK but reliant on agricultural & natural resource exports, including some deemed illicit & illegal by Interpol. The leader is adored by those who share his religion, but the minority that don’t all hate him and consider him an erratic, irrational zealot who wants to be seen as a prophet and spread the state religion internationally, by force if necessary. He believes women should not be employed outside the home, but so do a majority of the population. Literacy is only 25% and not rising, with only 10% of women able to read.

C. A very strictly communist country with a planned economy and very slow economic growth for decades, but its distribution of wealth is equal and all health care and education are free. It governs according to Marxist ideology and is mostly closed to the outside world. All industries and media are state-owned, and citizens are required to vote regularly for Party members who cannot be opposed or criticized. All social groups from work units to film and dance clubs are state-organized, and even dinner parties not organized by the state are viewed with suspicion by the gov’t. Malnutrition is common, and there is a famine about once every 10-15 years. Domestically, there are black markets, while abroad, many capitalist, ex-citizens who defected want to overthrow the regime. Countries like the USA are quite willing to help such dissidents and even have specific leaders in mind to replace those currently in power. Citizens are 99% literate, but they are bored by the extremely long, daily speeches from the head of state, an elderly technocrat who gained power after the revolution’s leader died.

D. A military dictatorship whose personalist leader has absolute power and has been in power for decades with no plan to democratize. The dictator has a decorated military career, having won a war of independence against a Western colonial country and then a civil war, and is an excellent public speaker. Despite his advanced age, many women still find him very handsome. He has five adult daughters from three wives, a two year-old son from a concubine, and he has not named a successor. Bureaucratic promotion is based on loyalty to the dictator (highly nepotistic), so almost all public spaces now have a statue of the generalissimo. The media system is closed, and it is illegal to criticize the junta. The streets are peaceful, but there is a lot of public surveillance to prevent vandalism, crime and other disorderly behavior. The economy is not growing quickly, but ethnic separatists don’t dare to declare independence or militarize against the regime.

E. The economy of this regime is growing rapidly, but its bureaucrats are seen as highly corrupt. It claims to be a democracy, but only one party has won elections for the past several decades, and prominent leaders of opposing parties frequently die mysterious deaths. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening even faster than GDP growth, so the leaders are appealing to average citizens’ patriotism against a neighboring, rival state whose economy is growing more equitably and almost as fast. The top leaders are all over 80 years old, and no one knows who will be the next head of state when they die. A popular, young, and highly educated elite has gained a sizable national following to fight corruption and has been organizing labor unions in the capital; he is suspected by top leaders of being a communist.

F. Social welfare has basically eliminated poverty in this regime, there is basic rule of law where the head of state is not concerned, but it is also an absolute monarchy ruled by a single royal family for centuries. The past two kings have been good and just, kind to their subjects in terms of sharing the kingdom’s wealth, but the eldest son in line for the throne is a playboy with little interest in governing. It has a very weak military but also taxes its subjects at a very high rate. Its media are open, but criticism of the king is censored. As the king ages, a growing number of subjects are petitioning for reform to become a constitutional/limited monarchy like Britain and also to grow the military for border security, specifically to keep out poor immigrants from neighboring countries.

EXAMPLE ANSWER: Legitimacy ranking EBFADC (if economic performance is all that matters, specifically economic growth rather than equality). In 10-20 years, this person might expect EBFA to survive, DC to fall (the same as the legitimacy ranking, though yours need not be the same). This person, likely a capitalist libertarian, would most like to live in E, least like to live in C. Your answer may be similar or very different from this person and be based on more factors than just GDP growth (or not).

MY ANSWER: Legitimacy ranking =

In 10-20 years, I expect these regime(s) to survive:

& these to fall:

I would most like to live in ____ because....

I would least like to live in ____ because...