

**ANTÓNIO COSTA PINTO**  
Edited by



# **RULING ELITES AND DECISION-MAKING IN FASCIST-ERA DICTATORSHIPS**

**SOCIAL SCIENCE MONOGRAPHS**



**António Costa Pinto**

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AND DECISION-MAKING  
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The basis for this research project emerged with the creation of the ICS dataset on the fascist elite, which includes complete prosographical data on the ministers of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal, and which proved to be a more complex task than may be imagined. Research on Italy, Germany and Portugal was undertaken by Ana Mónica Fonseca, Filipa Raimundo, Goffredo Adinolfi, Nuno Estevão Ferreira, Rita Almeida de Carvalho and Susana Chalante. Miguel Jerez Mir, in collaboration with Javier Luque, Javier Alarcón, José Manuel Trujillo, Isabel Bernal and Manuela Ortega conducted research on Spain. The examination of sources on the council of ministers and some of the case studies on decision-making processes were the responsibility of the authors. One exception was the transcription of Salazar's hand-written diaries, in which he recorded almost all of his daily activities, which led to the creation of the ICS dataset on Salazar.

While the sources consulted in the preparation of this book's chapters are spread across many archives and libraries, the main re-

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*António Costa Pinto*  
Lisbon, July 2009



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# Introduction: Ruling elites and decision- making in fascist-era dictatorships

*António Costa Pinto*

A prudent sovereign will relinquish some of his power voluntarily when he learns ... that limitations placed upon his caprice markedly increase his capacity to govern and to achieve his steady aims.

Jean Bodin<sup>1</sup>

After the so-called ‘third wave’ of democratisations at the end of the 20th century had significantly increased the number of democracies in the world, the survival of many dictatorships and the emergence of new dictatorial regimes have had an important impact. Taking as our starting point the dictatorships that emerged since the beginning of the 20th century, but mainly those institutionalised after 1945, the social science literature has returned to the question of the factors that led to the survival and downfall of the dictatorships and dictators and which the fascist regimes did not escape: the construction of legitimacy; the regimes’ capacity to distribute resources; divisions within the power coalitions; the political institutions of the dictatorships; their capacity for survival; and the cost-benefit analysis of rebellion (Gandhi 2008).

As monocratic regimes, dictatorships have been characterised as being ‘the selectorate of one’: the dictator, whose power remains significant (Putnam 1976: 52–3). However, dictators do not rule alone and a governing elite stratum is always formed below them.

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Holmes (1995: 11).

This book explores an underdeveloped area in the study of fascism and right-wing dictatorships: the structure of power. The old and rich tradition of elite studies can tell us much about the structure and operation of political power in the dictatorships that were associated with fascism, whether through the characterisation of the socio-professional structure or by the modes of political elite recruitment that express the extent of its rupture and/or continuity with the liberal regime, the type of leadership, and the relative power of the political institutions in the new dictatorial system (Lewis 2002; Almeida, Pinto and Bermeo 2003). Analysing four regimes associated with fascism (Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal) from this perspective, the book investigates the dictator-cabinet-single party triad from a comparative perspective.

### **Locating power in fascist-era dictatorships: political institutions and elites**

Italian Fascism and German National Socialism provided powerful institutional and political inspiration for other regimes, their types of leadership, institutions and operating methods already encapsulated the dominant models of the 20th-century dictatorship: personalised leadership, the single or dominant party and the 'technico-consultative' political institutions.

The dictatorships associated with fascism during the first half of the 20th century were personalised dictatorships (Payne 1996). It is interesting to see that even those regimes that were institutionalised following military coups and even military dictatorships gave birth to personalist regimes and more or less successful attempts to create single or dominant parties. The personalisation of leadership in the regimes was transformed into a dominant trait. More than half of the 172 dictatorships of the 20th century that had been 'initiated by militaries, parties, or a combination of the two, had been partly or fully personalised within three years of the initial seizure of power' (Geddes 2006: 164). However, autocrats need institutions and elites to rule and their role within the regimes is often underestimated, taking the centralisation of decision-making within the dictatorships as a given.

In order to avoid their legitimacy being undermined and their authority usurped, dictators need to co-opt elites and create or adapt institutions that are a locus for negotiation and decision-making: 'without institutions they cannot make policy concessions' (Geddes: 2006: 185). On the other hand, as Amos Perlmutter notes, no authoritarian regime can survive politically without the support of modern elites, such as bureaucrats, managers, technocrats and the military (Perlmutter 1981: 11). The political institutions of the dictatorships, even those that are 'nominally democratic', are not mere window dressing; they do affect policy making (Gandhi 2009). Autocrats also require 'compliance and cooperation', and in some cases, in order 'to organise policy compromises', they also 'need nominally democratic institutions' that can serve as a forum in which factions and can forge agreements (Gandhi 2009: viii): 'nominally democratic institutions can help authoritarian rulers maintain coalitions and survive in power' (Geddes 2006: 164).

When we look at the 20th-century dictatorships we note an enormous degree of institutional variation. The parties, cabinets, parliaments, corporatist assemblies, juntas and the whole set of institutions that Perlmutter defines as 'the parallel and auxiliary structures of domination, mobilisation and control', are symbols of the often tense diversities that characterise authoritarian regimes (Perlmutter 1981: 10).

Italian Fascism and German National Socialism represented attempts to create a new set of political and para-state institutions that were, in one form or another, present in other dictatorships of the period. After taking power, both the National Socialist and Fascist parties became powerful instruments of a new order as agents of a parallel administration. Transformed into single parties they flourished as breeding-grounds for a new political elite and as agents for a new mediation between the state and civil society, creating tensions between the single party, the government and the state apparatus in the process (Linz 2007). These tensions were also a consequence of the emergence of new centres of political decision-making that transferred power from the government and the

ministerial elite and concentrated it into the hands of Mussolini and Hitler (Pinto 2002).

The interaction between the single party, the government, the state apparatus and civil society appears fundamental if we are to achieve an understanding of the different ways in which the various dictatorships of the fascist era functioned. The party and its ancillary organisations were not merely parallel institutions; they were also central agents for the creation and maintenance of the leader's authority and legitimacy.

The fascist regimes were the first ideological one-party dictatorships situated on the right of the European political spectrum, and their development—alongside the consolidation of the first communist dictatorship—decisively marked the typologies of dictatorial regimes elaborated during the 1950s (Roberts 2006; Brooker 2009). While Friedrich and Brzezinski recognised that the single party played a more modest role within the fascist regimes than it did within their communist peers, part of the classification debate about European fascism continued to insist, eventually excessively, that the theories of totalitarianism 'deformed' their role, often without any empirical support (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956).

The inherent dilemma in the transformation of the single party as the dictatorship's 'ruling institution' into the leader's 'instrument of rule' is somewhat different in right-wing dictatorships than for their socialist equivalents (Pinto, Eatwell and Larsen 2007). Some authors speak of the degeneration of the party as a ruler organisation into an 'agent of the personal ruler' in the case of the communist parties in power (Brooker 1995: 9–10). In the dictatorships associated with fascism, the single party was not the regime's 'ruling institution': rather, it was one of many.

Many civilian rulers do not have a 'ready-made organisation upon which to rely' (Gandhi 2008: 29), and to counteract that precarious position civilian dictators tend to have their own type of organisation. In the inter-war period some fascist movements emerged either as rivals to or instable partners in the single or dominant party, and often as inhibitors to their formation, making the institutionalisation



of the regimes more difficult for the dictatorial candidates. However, the relationship between the dictators and their parties, particularly in those that existed prior to the taking of power, is certainly very complex. For example, Italian Fascism seems to provide a good illustration of the thesis that ‘where a party organisation has developed prior to the seizure (of power) in which able lieutenants have made their careers, possibly developed regional bases of support, and command the loyalty of men who fought under them, party members also have greater ability to constrain and, if necessary, replace leaders’ (Geddes 2006: 162), which is very different from the case with German National Socialism.

The centre of decision-making is also very different across the dictatorships. As many case studies have shown, ‘to mitigate the threat posed by elites, dictators frequently establish inner sanctums where real decisions are made and potential rivals are kept under close scrutiny’ (Gandhi 2008: 20). Dictators usually establish smaller formal and informal institutions ‘as a first institutional trench against threats from the ruling elite’ (Geddes 2006: 164).

This book, then, analyses this relationship between the single parties and the political decision-making institutions within those dictatorships associated with fascism, focusing on the relationship between the dictators, the single parties, the cabinet and the governing elites. The authors also seek to identify the main centre of decision-making power, the main institutional veto players and the interaction between the formal and informal power structures in each of the regimes being studied.

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