

# When dictators die, stability reigns

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"Instability rarely results from a dictator's passing," says Erica Frantz, Michigan State University political scientist. Credit: Michigan State University

A dictator's death rarely leads to regime change, according to a new study that comes as a fifth of the world's authoritarian rulers are at least

70 years old and in various stages of declining health.

Erica Frantz of Michigan State University and Andrea Kendall-Taylor of the National Intelligence Council studied all 79 cases of dictators dying in office between 1946 and 2012 and found the ruling regime remained intact through the following year 87 percent of the time.

By contrast, in all other forms of leadership exit in autocracies - including coups, civil wars and foreign intervention - the regime remained intact for one year in only 43 percent of cases.

"Episodes of instability that come on the heels of the dictator's death tend to dominate news headlines," said Frantz, MSU assistant professor of political science. "But our findings suggest such events are far from the norm. Instability rarely results from a dictator's passing."

Eleven of the approximately 55 dictators around the world are at least 70 years old and in declining health, including Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (who's 92) and Raul Castro of Cuba (85). "This means that a fifth of the world's dictatorships will face a leadership turnover in the not-too-distant future," the study says.

So why does a dictator's death in office most often lead to a continuation of the status quo?

Unlike coups or departures spurred by elite consensus, a leader's death of natural causes is not politically motivated. If dictators manage to remain in office until the very end, it means the regime's followers by and large have remained loyal.

"We can therefore infer that dying dictators leave behind a set of players who support the status quo and the perks that it affords them," the study says. "Such individuals have a strong incentive to converge on the

selection of a successor in order to preserve their privileged access to the spoils of office."

The paper, "When Dictators Die," is published in the *Journal of Democracy*.

Provided by Michigan State University

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