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Religious Co-option in Autocracy: A Theory Inspired by History*

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Abstract

The relationship between religion and politics is explored from a theoretical standpoint, assuming that religious clerics can be co-opted by the ruler acting as an autocrat. The comparative effects of decentralized versus centralized religions on the optimal level of cooperation between the autocrat and the religious clerics, which itself impinges upon political stability, is analysed. The paper shows that the presence of a decentralized body of clerics makes autocratic regimes more unstable. It also shows that in time of stability, the level of reforms is larger with a centralized religion than with a decentralized one. When the autocrat in the decentralized case pushes more reforms than in the centralized one, he always does so at the cost of stability. Historical case studies are presented that serve to illustrate the main results.

JEL Classification: D02, D72, N40, O57, P48, Z12

Keywords: Autocracy, instrumentalization of religion, centralized and decentralized religion, Islam, economic development, reforms

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