

The George Washington University

Application of Selectorate Theory in Explaining Idi Amin's Cooperation
with the 1976 Plane Hijacking by the Popular Front for the Liberation of
Palestine

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PSC 1003: Introduction to International Politics

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INTRODUCTION

Half an hour after Air France flight 139 departed from Athens, all communication with the jetliner was lost (The Associated Press). This was the first stage of what was to become a weeklong international incident. On June 27, 1976, the Air France flight began its scheduled flight plan to Paris, France with a layover in Athens, Greece (The Associated Press). However, once cruising altitude was reached en route to Paris, four passengers seized control of the aircraft. Orchestrated by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and carried out with the assistance of a sympathetic German terrorist organization, the hijackers diverted the plane and its 257 passengers to Uganda (The Associated Press). Following a brief refueling in Libya the hijacked flight landed in Uganda's Entebbe Airport. The hostages were promptly separated. All non-Israeli, and most non-Jews were put on a plane and flown safely to Paris ("Entebbe Diaries"). It was at this point that the hijackers explicated their demand for the release of over 40 Palestinian and German prisoners held in Israel, West Germany, and Greece ("Israelis Rescue Entebbe Hostages").

Upon landing in Uganda, the hijackers were personally greeted by fellow PFLP terrorists as well as the Ugandan leader, Idi Amin (News Dispatches). In addition to welcoming the hostage takers, Amin offered the use of his military and supplied more weaponry to the PFLP. The Ugandan military was promptly assigned to guard the hostages so that the hijackers could sleep, shower and rest; all under the hospitality of Idi Amin (News Dispatches). Assuming the constructivist viewpoint in which hegemonic countries have established cooperation with terrorists as negative, why did Idi Amin not only allow the hijacked plane to land in Uganda, but also provide military and tactical

support for the terrorists? Why do some leaders choose to cooperate with terrorist groups?

BACKGROUND

The central African country of Uganda gained independence from Britain in 1962 and welcomed Milton Obote as its first prime minister (Byrnes xiii). Obote took on a personal protégé in the form of a young, charismatic, military leader named Idi Amin (Byrnes 22). It was through this close relationship that Amin was able to successfully orchestrate a 1971 coup d'état, deposing Obote when the young country's leader was attending a conference in Singapore. Idi Amin swiftly ordered the mass executions of military members whom he believed would remain loyal to the ousted Obote (Byrnes 26). This would later prove to be one of his first, but certainly not last, arbitrary killings by which history remembers his bloody reign.

Further puzzling to Amin's welcoming of foreign hijackers is the history of Uganda's relationship with Israel. Following independence, Uganda maintained close ties with Britain and established friendly relations with Israel. Amin's close relationships with resident Israeli military officers, Israel's public disappointment with Prime Minister Obote, and Israel's quick recognition of the Amin government even led to skepticism concerning the degree of supportive Israel gave to Amin in his 1971 coup d'état (Byrnes 25). How did Uganda's Idi Amin go from being a friendly, African ally of Israel to aiding and abetting the kidnap and detainment of Israeli citizens?

THEORY

The term “selectorate theory” was first coined and articulated by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph Siverson, and James Morrow in their 2003 publication, *The Logic of Political Survival*. Selectorate theory seeks to explain the decisions of leaders, in particular, the allocation of resources. How a leader distributes his or her resources to their polity is directly linked to their political survival. It is with this theory that I will demonstrate why Idi Amin cooperated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine after the hijacking of flight 139.

There are four actors in selectorate theory: the non-winning selectorate, the winning coalition, those who are not within the selectorate (disenfranchised), and the incumbent leader (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 331). The selectorate (*S*) includes all those who have the required characteristics to participate in leadership selection. In the United States, for example, this required characteristic is age based, with the selectorate composed of those who are old enough to vote. Other selectorate characteristics can be gender, birthplace, special skills or knowledge, and/or wealth (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 43). Most importantly, membership in the selectorate allows for the opportunity, however slim, to be a part of the winning coalition (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 42). The winning coalition (*W*), a subset of the selectorate, is the number of people whose support is essential for a leader to remain in office (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 51). Without the backing of this special subset of the selectorate, a leader is left powerless and vulnerable (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 5). In the United States’ system, the winning coalition is very large and is composed of those people who give a candidate the requisite majority of the electoral college (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 42). In non-democracies, however, the

winning coalition can range anywhere from a handful of military officers to a couple hundred critical supporters who help guarantee the superiority of the incumbent leader over any potential challenger (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 5). On the opposite spectrum, those least influential in the selectorate theory model are those who do not possess selectorate qualities and are considered disenfranchised (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 39). An example of a few disenfranchised groups in modern democracies are persons under the determined voting age or sometimes those currently incarcerated. Finally, we look at the incumbent leader. A leader's desire to maintain power is the major assumption of selectorate theory. In order to keep power, the leader will allocate resources on the premise of keeping certain audiences happy. How a leader distributes goods, both public and private, depends on the ratio of the selectorate to the winning coalition.

Keeping the winning coalition happy is the incumbent leader's primary goal. To ensure this, the leader must decide what, how much, and to whom resources are given. Resources come in the form of both public and private goods. Public goods refer to policies or goods that are non-excludable and non-rival in consumption (Frieden 55). Examples of public goods range from large-scale infrastructure projects to antipollution legislation to education accessibility (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 29). While public goods provide for the winning coalition, their non-excludable nature means that even those in the non-winning selectorate can gain utility from them. A more useful method for a leader to reward members of the winning coalition is through private goods. Contrastingly, private goods are both excludable and rival in consumption (Frieden 55). Examining the size of both the selectorate and the size of the winning coalition enables one to predict the logical apportionment of public and private goods by a leader looking

to strengthen or maintain their power. Also critical to understanding leadership incentives is the loyalty norm. Within the winning coalition a leader must depend on enough members' loyalty to not defect to any political challenger (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 66). It is the strength, or weakness, of the loyalty norm that a leader's political survival is contingent upon.

The key mechanism in selectorate theory is the ratio of the winning coalition to the selectorate (Chang 7). As *The Logic of Political Survival* details, there are three types of ratios each with varying implications; a large selectorate with a large winning coalition (SW), a large selectorate with a small winning coalition (Sw), or a small selectorate with a small winning coalition (sw) (see Figure 1). A large selectorate with a large winning coalition (SW), is the most prevalent model in modern democracies (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 105). Private goods are of no real consequence for an (SW) leader as the well being of any one individual is not worth the cost of losing the entire winning coalition. Therefore, leaders in (SW) systems will primarily focus on public goods (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 105). With a concentration on public goods they remain appealing to those coalition members who consider defection while simultaneously incentivizing more of the selectorate to join the winning coalition in the future (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 105).

While a large selectorate and a large winning coalition is commonplace among democracies, a large selectorate with a small winning coalition (Sw) is the preferred model for any authoritarian leader especially in rigged election and single-party regimes (Peceny 570). Having a small coalition from a large selectorate is most beneficial for leaders; should any of the winning coalition members defect, there are more than enough

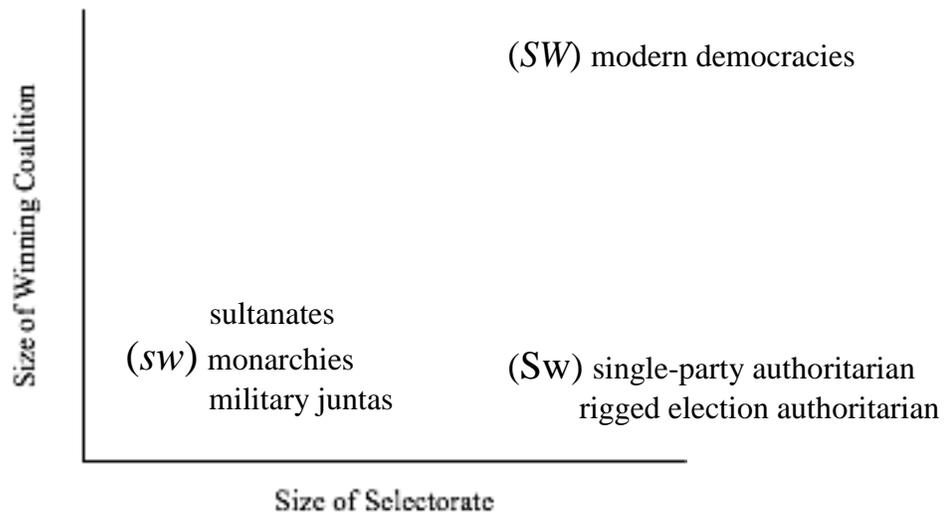
people within the selectorate who could replace them (Peceny 570). Loyalty to leader is therefore strong in (S_w) as the winning coalition members realize their fungibility.

Another contribution to the success of this model is fear; among the selectorate, only a small number of people fear losing access to privileged, private goods if their leader is defeated or overthrown. Such safeguarding of future personal reward, and membership in the winning coalition, is called a risk of exclusion (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 105). Risk of exclusion triggers fiercer loyalty and therefore costs less on the part of the leader to reinforce a high loyalty norm (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 66). Recall that distribution of private goods is emphasized in (sw) and the preference for public goods is strong in (SW); the model (S_w) also focuses on private goods although due to the enhanced loyalty norm via the risk of exclusion the opportunity for kleptocracy is greatest in these systems (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 129-130). Kleptocracy, or the widespread theft of government funds and resources for personal use, is found at much higher levels in (S_w) (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 130). As leaders are not forced to thinly distribute private goods to a large number of coalition members, as in (sw), he or she is able to funnel a moderate amount of private goods to their small, winning coalition without worrying about defection should they give too little. Now, consider a changing ratio of selectorate to winning coalition members (Chang 7). As the ratio changes, the actions of the leader must also shift.

The actions of monarchies, sultanates, or military juntas are most often in conjunction with a small selectorate and a small winning coalition (sw). With much of the population disenfranchised, these government types are able to spend a lot on private goods because there are few members of the winning coalition (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 17). On that same note, however, the small size of the selectorate increases the chances of

winning coalition members to defect and support a challenger (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 287). Chances of defection are higher in (*sw*) models because the small size of the selectorate indicates that the winning coalition cannot be easily replaced. In their 2011 publication, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics*, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith write, “Staying in power, as we now know, requires the support of others. This support is only forthcoming if a leader provides his or her essentials with more benefits than they might expect to receive under alternative leadership or government” (14). Therefore, spending on private goods is imperative in (*sw*) to maintain the loyalty norm.

Figure 1. Selectorate to Winning Coalition Ratio and Associated Regime Types



As previously discussed, the smaller the winning coalition is in relation to the selectorate, the more trust a leader can have in his or her coalition. However, if the size of the winning coalition were to grow in either (*sw*) or (*Sw*) that leader must begin to explore the opportunities to expand their resources (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 175). In expanding their available resources, the leader can have more private goods to distribute

should the occasion arise. We expect to see a leader seek increased access to resources if his or her winning coalition size is growing (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 334). Pursuit of alternative resources was the stimulus behind Idi Amin's actions in the 1976 Entebbe Hostage situation. The rise of Idi Amin's winning coalition, namely Nubian soldiers and military recruits from neighboring countries, required increased private goods that Amin was forced to seek abroad (Byrnes 203).

ANALYSIS

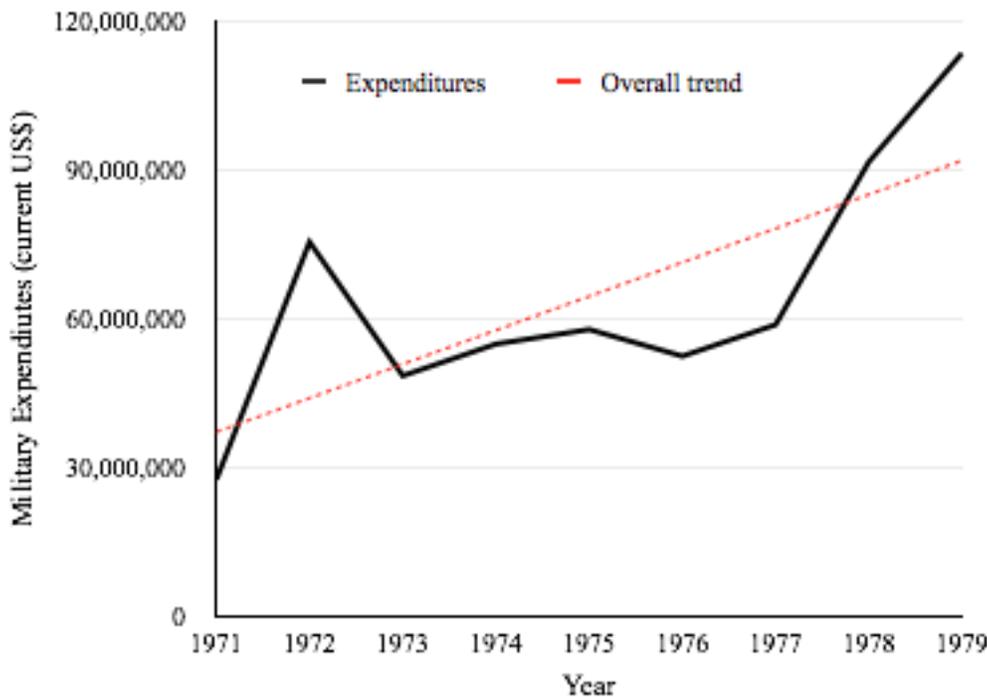
The correlating *Logic of Political Survival* data set consistently classified Idi Amin as having both a small selectorate and a small winning coalition (The Logic of Political Survival Data Source). As the selectorate theory would predict of (*sw*) systems, Amin was extremely generous to those within his winning coalition, and over time, the weaker loyalty norm associated with (*sw*) led to an increased demand for private goods and a desperate Amin did whatever was necessary to obtain discretionary spending money. As noted by Byrnes, "Amin never forgot the source of his power. He spent much of his time rewarding, promoting, and manipulating the army. Financing his ever-increasing military expenditures was a continuing concern" (27).

Idi Amin's winning coalition was composed of Nubians, a small community originating in Sudan's Nuba Mountains, and South Sudanese¹ soldiers recruited to work in Amin's infamously brutal police force (Byrnes 69). Amin was astute in his immediate placement of fellow Nubian tribesmen in key positions of his government just as the *Dictator's Handbook* argues, "The three most important characteristics of a coalition are:

¹ South Sudanese here refers to those people from the Southern region of Sudan during the 1970s. In 2011, the region from which these soldiers originated became an independent country now known as South Sudan.

(1) Loyalty; (2) Loyalty; (3) Loyalty. Once in power, [leaders] wisely surround themselves with trusted members of their own tribe or clan, installing them in the most important positions...and killing anyone that may turn out to be a rival” (58). While Amin’s winning coalition was a small number of Nubian and foreign recruits in the military, his selectorate was the entire Ugandan military. While high-ranking positions were first given to winning coalition members, the frequency of secret killings and defections made promotion into the winning coalition membership possible for the military selectorate (Kyemba 48). For instance, Kyemba notes, “To make up for the gaps in the officer corps...[Amin] appointed tank and [military] drivers—the people he most enjoyed chatting with—as majors or intelligence officers” (49). Under Amin the size of the military swelled to 21,000 personnel in 1977—more than double the size when Amin gained power in 1971 (Byrnes 203). Recall that Uganda during this time was classified as (*sw*) and therefore the size of the winning coalition is also indicative of the size of the selectorate. Data corroborates the growth of Idi Amin’s selectorate, the military, and consequently the growth of his winning coalition (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Ugandan National Defense Expenditure Under Idi Amin

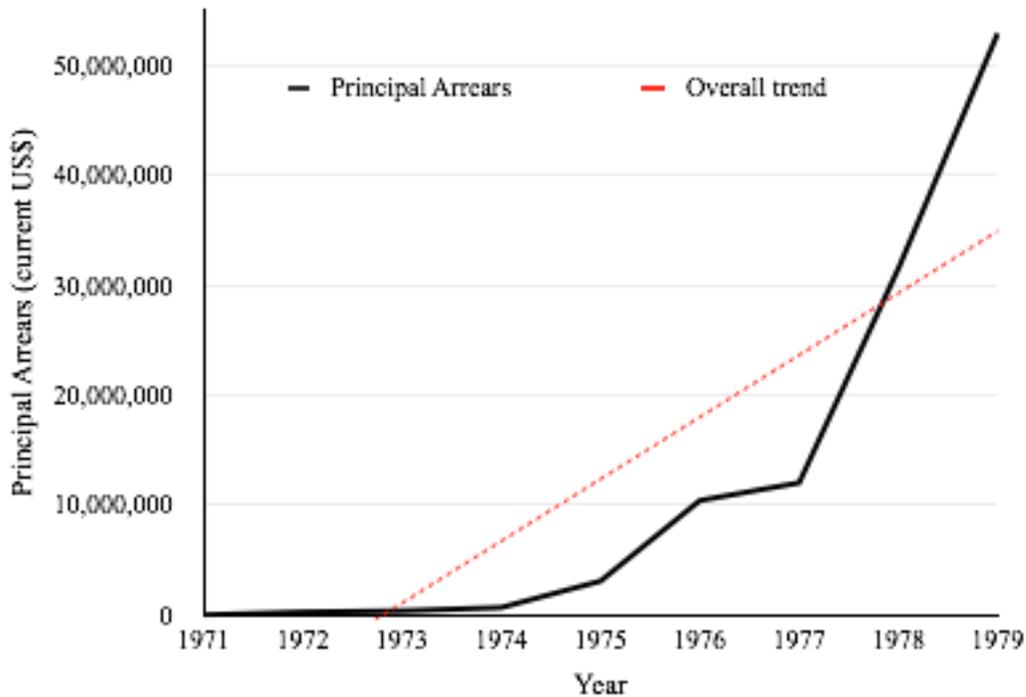


Source: *The Cross-National Times-Series Data Archive*

Uganda's classification from 1971-1979 as an (*sw*) system would seem to indicate a monarchy, sultanate, or military junta. From these regime types it is possible to conjure an idea for the type of foreign policy Uganda, specifically Idi Amin, would have pursued. However, Amin's rule cannot be so easily classified. The work of political scientist Barbara Geddes provides a more detailed categorization of Idi Amin's rule. Geddes argues that there are three major types of authoritarian rule: single-party, militaristic, and personalistic (51). Initially acting with the force of the military to overthrow Prime Minister Obote, Amin was quick to consolidate power and become what Geddes specifically cites as "[a] somewhat extreme instance of the transformation of a military intervention into personal tyranny" (52). Although Idi Amin wore a medal-laden uniform and both his selectorate and winning coalition were composed of military members, his reign was personalistic in nature (Geddes 231). This small clarification in authoritarian leadership is important in the understanding of how Idi Amin went about pursuing resources. "[P]ersonalistic rulers," contends Chang and Golden, "are less dependent on domestic revenues," which explains personalistic rulers' propensity to seek aid and investment from other countries (6). Instead of levying higher taxes on Ugandans, which would not have been popular among his selectorate and winning coalition alike, Amin relied on Britain and Israel for money, that is, until the attached conditions limited his ability to spend said money on his winning coalition. The British required feasibility studies prior to any distribution of money and the Israelis considered new investment based on the merit alone. However, according to Henry Kyemba, a former minister in the Amin administration who defected in 1977, this was not the kind of money Amin wanted (Kyemba 55).

In 1972 Amin visited with the authoritarian Libyan leader, Muammar al-Gaddafi, whose support of Islamic terrorist organizations had already given him a reputation as an “internationally destabilizing” figure (Palmowski). Amin’s switch in policy was swift. Upon returning from this impromptu meeting, in which Amin secured military and financial aid, the Ugandan leader immediately released a statement condemning Israel for its seizure of Arab lands in 1967 and articulating the evils of Zionism (Kyemba 55). After refusing to meet with the Israeli ambassador, Amin expelled all Israelis from Uganda and by the end of March 1972 all relations with the former ally were severed (Kyemba 56). Libya was not the only country to which Amin catered policy change; rediscovering his previously neglected Islamic heritage was strategically valuable in inducing money loans from Saudi Arabia (Byrnes 28). Throughout Amin’s rule the Ugandan foreign debt continuously increased. The principal arrears demonstrated in Figure 3 represent the principal repayments due, but not paid, on long-term external debt which can be defined as “debt that has an original or extended maturity of more than one year and that is owed to nonresidents...repayable in currency, goods, or services” (World DataBank). The data provides empirical evidence for Idi Amin’s rapid borrowing which supplied him the requisite amount of private goods to spend on his winning coalition.

Figure 3. Ugandan Principal Arrears Public and Publicly Guaranteed (Long-term external debt)



Source: *World DataBank*

CRITIQUE

The theoretical lens through which the question of state cooperation with terrorism is viewed is crucial in application. Realists could reasonably argue that Idi Amin's actions were rational. That is, he was acting in the interest of maximizing power. Alternatively, if taking a neorealist or structural realist approach, Amin was acting to maximize security. However, it's important to piece together the puzzle of terrorism cooperation and selectorate theory in a constructivist framework. First and foremost, realism doesn't give a hoot about internal state politics. Domestic politics are what Kenneth Waltz, father of neorealism, would categorize as the second level of analysis (Waltz 80). Waltz's first "image," or level of analysis, is that of the individual which is also in play here. In concluding his 1959 publication, *Man, the State, and War*, Waltz

finds that the first two levels of analysis pale in importance to the third level, international anarchy (Waltz 159). Acting under the realist paradigm forces one to look at states as single, comparable entities with no regard to the internal politics of each. Due to the inherent domestic implications of selectorate theory, realism must be eliminated as a viable lens.

Of the remaining major schools of thought in international politics, liberalism and constructivism, liberalism must also be sidelined. While liberalism is more concerned with the internal workings of states than realism, established norms—a staple of constructivism—are not highlighted. One of the reasons why leaders cooperate with terrorist organizations, as I have explicated, requires established international norms. Without these established norms making cooperation with terrorism taboo, Idi Amin's actions would not be anomalous.

CONCLUSION

Idi Amin had been very excited at the opportunity provided by the Air France flight 139 hijacking to “[h]umiliate the Israelis and increase his stock with the Arabs” by welcoming the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestinian hijackers and helping them draft their demands (Kyemba 169). As the selectorate theory has satisfactorily shown, the fundamental ideology of the hijackers was irrelevant to Idi Amin; Libya's, specifically Muammar al-Gaddafi's, support for the PFLP was reason enough for Amin to support them as well. On July 4th, 1976, only three days after landing in Uganda, Israeli commandos raided the Entebbe Airport (“Israelis Rescue Entebbe Hostages”). While two hostages and one Israeli soldier were killed in the exchange of gunfire, the Israelis left

twenty Ugandan soldiers and seven hijackers dead in addition to decimating Uganda's air force, which had been headquartered at Entebbe Airport (Kyemba 172). Idi Amin suffered heavy losses, but his relationship with Libya and the Arab world did not wane. Amin continued to receive significant resources and he was therefore able to remain in power until his eventual toppling in 1979 (Byrnes 29). Sometimes in order to understand the seemingly irrational or nonaligned actions of leaders, like cooperating with terrorists, one must first look through a domestic politics framework; a framework that can be easily evaluated using *The Logic of Political Survival's* selectorate theory.

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