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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE DURABILITY OF COERCION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIME STRATEGIES AND RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Despite the global diffusion of democratic norms, authoritarian regimes continue to persist and even adapt in the modern era. This study seeks to analyze the internal structures, strategies, and institutional mechanisms that explain the resilience of authoritarianism, moving beyond traditional "black box" views of dictatorship.

Methods: A systematic review of comparative political science literature and case studies was conducted to examine different types of authoritarian regimes—single-party, military, personalist, and hybrid. The analysis focuses on how these systems combine coercion, co-optation, and legitimation to maintain control and stability.

Results: Findings reveal that authoritarian durability is not solely dependent on repression but also on institutional design and strategic management of elites and citizens. Regimes sustain power through mechanisms such as performance legitimacy, nationalism, and controlled participation. Institutionalized single-party regimes demonstrate greater longevity than personalist or military juntas due to their ability to manage succession and integrate broader societal interests. Nonetheless, all face structural vulnerabilities, including economic crises, elite fragmentation, and mass mobilization.

Conclusion: The study concludes that authoritarianism is a dynamic and adaptive mode of governance rather than a static remnant of the past. Understanding its evolution requires nuanced theoretical and empirical approaches that account for institutional complexity and regime adaptability in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS

Authoritarianism, Comparative Politics, Regime Durability, Co-Optation, Repression, Single-Party State, Personalist Rule, Hybrid Regimes

1. INTRODUCTION

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent wave of democratization led many scholars and policymakers to proclaim the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy, a sentiment famously captured in Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History" thesis. Yet, over three decades later, authoritarianism not only persists but appears resurgent. From the single-party rule of the Chinese Communist Party and the personalist dictatorship in North Korea to the military-dominated regime in Myanmar and the competitive authoritarian systems in Russia and Hungary, non-democratic regimes continue to govern a significant portion of the world's population.

This resilience challenges earlier democratization paradigms and demands a rigorous comparative analysis of authoritarianism on its own terms. The study of authoritarian regimes has evolved from treating them as generic "dictatorships" to recognizing their vast diversity and complex internal logics. Comparative politics, with its focus on institutions, political behavior, and systemic analysis, provides the essential toolkit for unpacking this complexity. The central question driving this field is: How do authoritarian regimes maintain power and

ensure their survival in the face of internal and external challenges?

This paper argues that authoritarian durability is a product of strategic political engineering. It is achieved through a calculated balancing act of neutralizing threats from rival elites and managing acquiescence or support from the masses. This involves a repertoire of strategies, including the creation of inclusive institutions for co-opting potential opponents, the development of ideologies and performance-based legitimacy to justify rule, and the calibrated use of repression to eliminate dissent without triggering widespread backlash.

This paper will proceed by first outlining the methodological approach and key typologies for classifying authoritarian regimes. It will then delve into the core strategies of authoritarian resilience, analyzing the politics of co-optation and repression in turn. The paper will further explore the critical challenges that threaten authoritarian stability, from economic shocks to succession crises. Finally, through a comparative discussion, it will synthesize how different regime types navigate these challenges, concluding with implications for the future study of comparative authoritarianism.

2. METHODOLOGY AND TYPOLOGIES: CLASSIFYING AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

To compare authoritarian regimes systematically, scholars must first categorize them. This paper employs a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) methodology, focusing on identifying the core institutional features that define different types of authoritarian rule and linking them to outcomes of stability and durability.

2.1 Methodology

This research is based on a systematic review of the seminal and contemporary literature in comparative authoritarianism. It draws on cross-national datasets (e.g., V-Dem, Polity IV) for broad patterns and employs focused case studies (e.g., China vs. North Korea, Singapore vs. Venezuela) for deeper, contextualized analysis. The approach is both inductive—drawing generalizations from observed cases—and deductive—testing theoretical propositions about the relationship between institutions and resilience.

2.2 Key Typologies

The most influential typology, advanced by Barbara Geddes (1999), classifies regimes based on the identity of the group that holds ultimate power. This yields three ideal types, with a fourth hybrid category often added:

2.2.1 Single-Party Regimes

Power is vested in the ruling party, which penetrates and controls the state and society. Examples include China, Vietnam, and Cuba. These regimes are often highly institutionalized, with rules for elite recruitment and promotion, which enhances stability. The party serves as a machinery for co-optation, social control, and monitoring the bureaucracy and military.

2.2.2 Military Regimes

A group of officers governs, and power is exercised through the military hierarchy. Examples include Myanmar (pre-2021 coup and after) and historical cases like Chile under Pinochet. These regimes often seize power to resolve a national crisis but struggle with everyday governance and legitimizing their rule. They are typically more prone to internal factionalism and often face pressure to return to the barracks.

2.2.3 Personalist Regimes

Power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader, who subordinates formal institutions (party, military) to his (rarely her) personal authority. Loyalty is based on personal ties rather than ideological or institutional allegiances. Examples include North Korea under the Kim dynasty, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela under Chávez/Maduro. These regimes are highly unstable, as their fate is tied to the survival of one individual, and succession is often chaotic.

2.2.4 Hybrid Regimes

Many modern authoritarians blend these types. Party-Personalist

(Russia under Putin, where a strong leader operates within but dominates a party system) or Military-Personalist (Libya under Gaddafi) are common. Furthermore, the concept of electoral authoritarianism describes regimes that hold regular elections but manipulate them so severely that they are not democratic, using them as a tool for legitimation and co-optation rather than contestation (e.g., Hungary under Orbán).

This typological framework is the first step in comparison, as it allows us to hypothesize that different structures will employ distinct strategies and face unique vulnerabilities.

2.3 The Pillars of Authoritarian Resilience: Co-optation and Institutionalization

While repression is the most visible tool of authoritarian rule, its sustained and indiscriminate use is costly and can be counterproductive. Consequently, durable regimes rely heavily on co-optation—the process of bringing potential opponents into the system and giving them a stake in the regime's survival.

2.3.1 Elite Co-optation

The primary threat to any dictator comes from within the regime's inner circle—the "allies" who have access to and resources to orchestrate a coup. To manage this, regimes create institutions that regulate elite competition and distribute benefits.

In single-party systems, the nomenklatura system and a hierarchical party structure offer career paths, economic privileges, and political power to loyal members. Factionalism is managed within the party's congresses and central committees.

In monarchies and personalist regimes, co-optation is often based on kinship, tribal ties, or the distribution of economic rents (e.g., oil wealth) to a small circle of supporters.

Legislatures in electoral authoritarian regimes, while not democratic, serve as a "menu of manipulation" (Schedler, 2002). They provide a platform for incorporating opposition figures, distributing patronage to local elites, and creating a veneer of representation.

2.3.2 Mass Co-optation

Regimes also need to secure at least the passive acquiescence of the populace. This is achieved through:

Performance Legitimacy: Basing the right to rule on the delivery of tangible goods, primarily economic growth and public goods (e.g., stability, order). The "authoritarian bargain" posits that citizens exchange political freedoms for economic security. China's CCP is a prime example.

Social Policy: Providing subsidized housing, education, or healthcare (e.g., in Cuba or Iran) can create a dependent constituency that fears the uncertainty of regime change.

Controlled Participation: Allowing non-threatening forms of political engagement, such as voting in non-competitive elections or participating

Table 1: Geddes's Typology of Authoritarian Regimes

Regime Type	Power Holder	Key Institutions	Examples	Typical Durability
Single-Party	The Party	Ruling Party, Politburo	China, Vietnam, Cuba	High
Military	The Officer Corps	Military Junta, Council of Officers	Myanmar, Egypt (1952-2011)	Low
Personalist	The Dictator	Personal Network, Secret Police	North Korea, Turkmenistan	Medium (volatile)
Hybrid	Combination	Dominant Party + Strong Leader	Russia, Singapore	Varies

in state-sponsored mass organizations, can foster a sense of inclusion and provide the regime with information about public sentiment.

Institutionalization is the process by which these co-optative practices become regularized and governed by predictable (if unwritten) rules. Institutionalized regimes, particularly single-party states, are better at handling critical issues like leadership succession, thereby avoiding violent power struggles that can destabilize personalist or military rule.

2.4 The Role of Repression, Legitimation, and Information Control

Co-optation alone is insufficient. All authoritarian regimes maintain a repertoire of coercive and discursive tools to suppress dissent and manufacture consent.

2.5 The Calculus of Repression

Authoritarians are strategic in their use of violence. The key is to use just enough repression to deter opposition without creating martyrs or triggering international condemnation. This often involves:

Preemptive Repression: Targeting activists, journalists, and intellectuals before they can organize broad-based movements.

Selective Violence: Disappearing or imprisoning ringleaders to decapitate opposition movements while offering amnesty to low-level participants.

The "Secret Police": Institutions like the Stasi in East Germany or the Egbé in North Korea create a climate of fear and pervasive surveillance, making organized opposition incredibly risky.

2.6 Legitimation Strategies

To reduce the need for costly repression, regimes develop narratives to justify their rule.

Ideology: Marxism-Leninism, Juche in North Korea, or religious doctrines (e.g., Iran's Velayat-e Faqih) provide a blueprint for society and a source of legitimacy.

Nationalism: Rallying the population against a real or imagined external threat (e.g., the West, neighboring countries) is a powerful tool for unifying the populace behind the leader.

Charismatic Authority: Personalist rulers often cultivate a cult of personality, portraying themselves as the indispensable father of the nation (e.g., Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi).

2.7 Information Control

In the digital age, controlling the flow of information is paramount. Authoritarian regimes employ:

Censorship: Blocking access to foreign websites and independent media.

Propaganda: Flooding the information space with pro-regime content.

Astroturfing: Creating fake online grassroots movements to simulate popular support.

Cyber-surveillance: Using advanced technology to monitor citizens' online activities.

The most resilient regimes, like China, have successfully moved beyond mere censorship to creating a vast, engaging, and nationalistic online ecosystem that actively shapes public opinion.

2.8 Challenges to Authoritarian Stability

Despite these sophisticated strategies, all authoritarian regimes are inherently fragile. Their survival is constantly threatened by several vulnerabilities.

2.8.1 The Succession Problem

In the absence of democratic elections, transferring power is the Achilles' heel of authoritarianism. Personalist regimes are most vulnerable, as the death of the leader often triggers violent conflict. Even in single-party states, succession can lead to intense behind-the-scenes factional warfare that weakens the regime.

2.8.2 Elite Fragmentation

The same elites co-opted into the system can become a threat if they perceive their privileges are at risk. Economic downturns can shatter coalitions, as shrinking resources lead to intense distributional conflicts among regime insiders. This often precipitates a coup or a split that empowers the opposition.

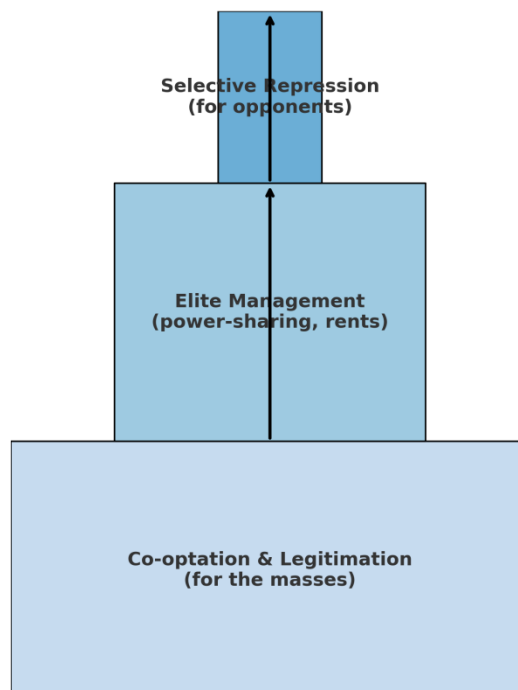


Figure 1: The Authoritarian Toolkit: A Balancing Act

2.8.3 Economic Crises

Performance legitimacy is a double-edged sword. While economic success bolsters the regime, economic failure—inflation, recession, corruption scandals—rapidly erodes the "authoritarian bargain." This was a key factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Arab Spring uprisings.

2.8.4 Mass Mobilization

While rare, widespread popular protest can overwhelm a regime's coercive and co-optative capacity. Successful mobilization is most likely when economic crises coincide with divisions within the elite, signaling to the public that the regime is vulnerable. The military's refusal to fire on protesters is often the tipping point.

2.8.5 International Pressure

Sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and support for pro-democracy movements can constrain authoritarian regimes. However, this often backfires by enabling the ruler to rally the population against foreign interference. Furthermore, authoritarian powers like China and Russia often support each other, creating a counterweight to Western democratizing pressure.

3. DISCUSSION: COMPARATIVE RESILIENCE ACROSS REGIME TYPES

Synthesizing the evidence, it becomes clear that the capacity to weather these challenges is not distributed equally across authoritarian regime types. Their institutional structure is a primary determinant of their resilience.

3.1 Single-Party Regimes

This category demonstrates the highest average longevity. The institutionalization of the party provides crucial stability. It offers:

Predictable Succession: Rules (formal or informal) govern the transfer of power, preventing destructive scrambles.

Elite Management: The party hierarchy incorporates a broad swath of societal elites, channeling their ambitions through internal promotion rather than coups.

Social Control: The party's reach into workplaces, neighborhoods, and social groups allows for effective monitoring, co-optation, and mobilization.

Ideological Flexibility: Party ideology can be adapted to new challenges (e.g., China's shift to market socialism) without dismantling the entire system.

3.2 Military Regimes

Tend to be the shortest-lived. Their comparative advantage is seizing power, not exercising it. They lack:

Governing Expertise: Soldiers are not trained to manage complex economies or social policies.

Legitimacy: Their claim to rule based on resolving a crisis wears thin, and they face constant pressure to return to the barracks and hold elections.

Cohesion: Military juntas are often riven by service rivalries and personal ambition.

3.3 Personalist Regimes

Are wildcards. They can be stable for decades if the leader successfully monopolizes coercion and patronage (e.g., North Korea). However, they are extremely vulnerable because:

No Succession Plan: The regime is synonymous with the individual.

Extreme Information Blockage: The leader is surrounded by sycophants, leading to disastrous policy decisions.

Purges of Competent Elites: To maintain power, the leader must weaken any independent institution (like a professional military or party) that could challenge him, often crippling the state's effectiveness.

The rise of hybrid and electoral authoritarian regimes represents an adaptation, attempting to graft the legitimizing shell of democracy onto authoritarian core practices. They use elections to regulate elite competition, distribute patronage, and gain a veneer of legitimacy internationally, making them surprisingly durable.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The comparative study of authoritarian regimes reveals that modern dictatorship is a complex, adaptive, and often sophisticated form of political organization. The era of the simple "tin-pot dictator" relying solely on terror is largely over. Today's authoritarians are savvy political engineers who build resilient systems by institutionalizing co-optation, manipulating information, cultivating legitimacy, and deploying repression with strategic precision.

The key conclusion of this analysis is that authoritarian durability is structurally determined. Single-party regimes, with their inclusive institutions for managing elites and mobilizing society, have proven to be the most robust model of non-democratic rule. In contrast, personalist and military regimes are inherently more fragile due to their opaque succession processes and vulnerability to elite fragmentation.

This has significant implications. First, for policymakers in democratic states, it suggests that simplistic strategies of hoping for authoritarian collapse are misguided. Engaging with or pressuring these regimes requires a nuanced understanding of their internal structures and

Table 2: Common Challenges and Authoritarian Responses

Challenge	Description	Authoritarian Response
Succession Crisis	Power vacuum upon leader's death or incapacitation.	Establish hereditary rule (NK); design elite consensus-building institutions (China); pre-emptively eliminate rivals.
Economic Downturn	Erosion of performance legitimacy.	Blame external forces; escalate nationalist rhetoric; increase selective co-optation or repression.
Popular Protest	Mass mobilization demanding change.	Combine limited concessions with selective repression; exploit opposition divisions; wait for protests to fizzle out.
Elite Defection	Key allies withdraw support.	Purge disloyal factions; redistribute rents to loyalists; leverage security apparatus to monitor elites.

vulnerabilities. Targeting the economic interests of key elite supporters may be more effective than broad sanctions that hurt the population and allow the regime to rally nationalist sentiment.

Second, for the study of comparative politics, it underscores the need to take authoritarian institutions seriously. They are not merely dysfunctional imitations of democratic ones but are purpose-built for the primary goal of regime survival. Understanding their logic is essential for any comprehensive theory of political systems.

Finally, the future of authoritarianism seems to point towards further institutional hybridization and technological adaptation. The development of digital authoritarianism, with its tools of AI surveillance and social credit systems, represents a new frontier in the eternal contest between the desire for domination and the aspiration for freedom. The comparative politics of authoritarianism will remain a vital and evolving field for the foreseeable future.

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