Commentary

Authoritarian Politics: Trends and Debates

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Abstract
In the past two decades, the field of authoritarian politics has grown substantially. This commentary surveys the major findings in the field, how it is has evolved, and key debates that have emerged in response.

Issue
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1. Introduction

Dictatorships govern about 40% of the world's countries today (Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2014). Though democracy spread across much of the globe after the end of the Cold War, it did not take root everywhere. Many long-standing dictatorships withstood the chaos that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union, such as those in China and North Korea, and many new democracies that emerged at this time slowly reverted back to authoritarian rule afterwards, such as Russia by 1993 and Armenia by 1994. Still, even after the post-Cold War dust settled in the mid-1990s, democracies outnumbered their authoritarian counterparts by about two to one. That said, there are indications that authoritarianism is set to make a come back. According to the watchdog organization Freedom House's 2018 report assessing global political rights and civil liberties, democracy has suffered 12 consecutive years of decline (Freedom House, 2018). Despite the optimism of modernization theorists many decades ago (Lipset, 1959), authoritarian regimes do not appear to be going away any time soon.

Perhaps in response to this reality, the field of authoritarian politics has expanded considerably in the past two decades or so. Whereas historically research on democracies far outpaced that on dictatorships—at least partially due to the difficulties inherent in studying authoritarian regimes—this is decreasingly the case. This commentary surveys the major developments in the literature on authoritarian politics, summarizes the key findings, and highlights the key debates that have emerged in response.

2. The Evolution of Research on Dictatorships

Research on dictatorships has in many ways evolved in line with changes in the nature of authoritarian rule we have witnessed over the course of the last century. In response to the emergence of regimes such as Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler and the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin, for example, scholars focused on the concept of totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes are dictatorships led by a single political party that feature a highly cohesive ideology and an all-encompassing secret police (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1956). The goal of such regimes is to fundamentally transform society through state propaganda and coercion. Research on totalitarianism primarily emphasized the characteristics of these regimes, as well as the factors that enabled their emergence, such as the social isolation citizens experienced following periods of crisis (Arendt, 1951).

Following World War II and the collapse of colonial empires around the globe, a new crop of dictatorships formed, many of which bore little in common to the totalitarian regimes identified in the literature. Many of these new dictatorships featured a single, dominant political party, but—unlike their totalitarian counterparts—they did not seek societal conversion to meet an ide-

ological goal. Many of these regimes sprouted on the heels of independence movements, such as Kenya under the Kenyan African National Union (1963 to 2002) and Singapore under the People's Action Party (1965 to the present). In response to these developments, scholars sought to explain the different features of dominant parties and how they influence regime strength, with the intensity and duration of the party's struggle to assume power identified as critical (Huntington & Moore, 1970).

As the Cold War heated up in the 1970s and global superpowers devoted greater military resources to developing countries to secure their support, military dictatorships took power in many parts of the developing world, including Brazil (1964 to 1985), Nigeria (1967 to 1979), and Thailand (1977 to 1988). In conjunction with this trend, scholars turned their attentions toward differentiating military dictatorships, primarily based on the ambitions of the ruling junta in terms of their intent to rule indefinitely or step down after bringing the country order (Perlmutter, 1977).

Many dictatorships also emerged at this time that looked like military dictatorships, because the leader wore a military uniform, but were governed differently because the military institution lacked any de facto influence over policy. Examples include Uganda under Idi Amin (1971 to 1979) and Iraq under Saddam Hussein (1979 to 2003). In response, scholars also delved into the nature of strongman rule—often referred to as personalist dictatorship—where all power lands in the hands of a single individual. Research on this form of dictatorship emphasized the tendency for such leaders to steal from the state, erode state institutions, and put their countries on paths toward political decay (Decalo, 1985).

Following the end of the Cold War, geopolitical pressures for countries to pursue political liberalization—often linked to foreign aid—led to significant changes in terms of what the "typical" dictatorship looked like. Whereas only around half of all dictatorships in power during the Cold War featured legislatures and multiparty electoral competition, today the vast majority of them do (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014). These dynamics led scholars to unpack the purposes of pseudo-democratic institutions in authoritarian regimes, with a key finding to emerge being that they tend to enhance authoritarian survival (Gandhi, 2008). These developments have generated new questions and debates, a subject to which I now turn.

3. Key Debates in the Field

There undoubtedly exist a plethora of unresolved debates in the field of authoritarian politics; this commentary focuses on the two that—in my view—are the most relevant to a broad swathe of the literature.

The first has to do with classification and measurement. Classifications of dictatorships fall into two categories: categorical and continuous (Ezrow & Frantz, 2011). Categorical typologies view dictatorships as equally authoritarian, with the key distinction of interest being various features of their rule. Examples include classifications of dictatorships as civilian, monarchic, or military (Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010), or personalist, monarchic, dominant-party, or military (Geddes et al., 2014). Continuous typologies, by contrast, see authoritarianism as a linear concept, such that systems can be placed on a scale ranging from fully authoritarian to fully democratic. Examples include the broad array of typologies that emphasize hybrid political systems, often referred to as grey zone (Diamond, 2002), competitive authoritarian (Levitsky & Way, 2002), or electoral authoritarian (Schedler, 2006), as well as the measures often used to capture these concepts, such as combined Polity scores (Marshall, Gurr, & Jaggers, 2017) and Freedom House civil liberties and political rights scores (Freedom House, 2018).

The distinction between the two typologies may seem unimportant, but is actually quite consequential and the subject of substantial discussion (see, for example, Cheibub et al., 2010; Kailitz, 2013; Wahman, Teorell, & Hadenius, 2013). One of the messages to come out of this discussion is that scholars should take great care in their research to ensure that the theoretical concepts they emphasize are reflected in the typology that they rely on. Categorical typologies, for example, allow scholars to avoid making any assumptions about the linearity of the path from dictatorship to democracy, but cannot shed light on dynamics of political liberalization. At the same time, continuous typologies can tell us about whether systems are moving to or away from different gradations of authoritarianism, but mask political changes occurring within countries from one equally authoritarian regime to the next (e.g., Iran transition from the Shah's rule in 1979 to the theocratic regime in power today; Conroy-Krutz & Frantz, 2017). Given that research on authoritarianism suggests that pseudo-democratic institutions prolong authoritarian survival, how do we know whether the adoption of political institutions that broaden participation and contestation is indicative of a political system that is less authoritarian as opposed to a sign of a savvy regime boosting its odds of survival?

Relatedly, a second critical debate has to do with the mechanisms through which pseudo-democratic institutions influence authoritarian survival. Some scholars posit that such institutions bolster survival because they serve as tools for mobilizing supporters and signaling strength to challengers (Geddes et al., in press); others assert that they enable dictators to commit to power-sharing deals (Magaloni, 2008); and others put forth that they are arenas in which regimes can provide policy concessions to rivals (Gandhi, 2008). It is possible that all of these pathways are at play, perhaps dependent on the type of institutions under analysis. Yet, future research is needed to connect the dots and inform our understanding of how, precisely, pseudo-democratic institutions confer survival gains, and under what contexts. Importantly, if the vast majority of dictatorships today

feature pseudo-democratic institutions, then what type of analytical leverage do we gain by stating that they prolong survival? Future research is also needed to dig deeper into the full range of institutions that dictatorships employ to maintain control, as well as examine how the rise in pseudo-democratic institutions across dictatorships has influenced their use of other survival instruments, such as repression.

4. Conclusion

The field of authoritarian politics has expanded considerably in the past two decades or so. We now know that dictatorships are not all the same and that the differences among them often have important consequences for policies of interest (Ezrow & Frantz, 2011). We also know that most dictatorships today feature the same types of institutions that we typically associate with democracies, even though they serve very different purposes (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). These advances have brought with them new debates, suggesting there are many promising avenues for future research in the years to come.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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