

# Open Authoritarian Regimes: Surviving and Thriving in the Liberal International Order

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## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Conventional and scholarly wisdoms in the West hold that authoritarian regimes contain within themselves the seeds of their own inevitable destruction, and that those with successful economies will invariably become democratic in due course. Empirically, the waves of regime changes over the past three decades in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and most recently in Eastern Europe and Eurasia fueled these wisdoms and inspired a vast and distinguished literature.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have uncovered the causes of transitions that culminate in competitive elections, generating a variety of explanations that emphasize internal socioeconomic crises, as well as the strategic behavior of both elite and mass-level actors who exploit and capitalize on these openings.

Yet, for decades now, it has also been an empirical fact that a set of modern authoritarian states has experienced astonishing economic growth and prosperity while simultaneously restricting political freedoms.<sup>2</sup> Building on the teleology of modernization theory, and relying on examples such as South Korea and Taiwan, many observers argue that the success of these emerging economies will predictably lead to democratic transitions; the only real question is how soon. In this project, we contend, on the contrary, that at the turn of the twenty-first century, a subset of authoritarian regimes with particular characteristics—we label them “open authoritarian regimes”—appear indefinitely sustainable. These regimes deliver economic success to their populations through versions of state-controlled capitalism, and excel at plugging into the international system in ways that allow them to benefit from global connectivity while retaining their grip on domestic power. It is their very openness to the liberal international order that sustains their authoritarian model.<sup>3</sup>

In this project, we conceptualize this new category of regimes, explain the mechanisms that underlie their success, and provide empirical evidence to demonstrate the plausibility of the argument. We argue, in short, that open authoritarian regimes have been able to modernize economically and socially *without* democratizing because they are integrated with the international system in specific ways that dually enable

their success and shield them from pressures for domestic political reform.<sup>4</sup> Our objective is not to claim that today’s open authoritarian regimes will never democratize; rather it is to highlight the current global context for their particular non-democratic equilibrium. In doing so, instead of focusing on the potential pitfalls these regimes face, we shift the emphasis to understanding the reasons and mechanisms that allow them to stay in power.<sup>5</sup>

We claim that the international system as it exists today is peculiarly conducive to the survival and relative success of a subset of authoritarian states by articulating the ways in which open authoritarian regimes use their ties to the international system as a way to strengthen their rule at home. They are able to reap the economic and social benefits of integrating with the liberal international order while maintaining relatively closed or illiberal domestic political systems. Furthermore, by leveraging their international posture, open authoritarian regimes have improved their ability to respond to precisely the types of internal pressures and contradictions that scholars have assumed would lead to their downfall.

Our logic is twofold. First, we argue that successful open authoritarian regimes increasingly rely on their growing material and ideological leverage to choose the terms of their *selective interconnectivity* with the liberal international order. The foundation of their impressive growth and poverty reduction records has come through their integration into the global economy. Yet, from the oil-rich states of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf that control energy supplies to the Asian manufacturing powerhouses that rely on cheap labor, they have been careful about precisely how they are connected, all the while jealously protecting their sources of competitiveness. These states have accumulated their material wealth through neo-mercantilist foreign economic policies and have, more recently, begun to push a complementary normative foreign policy agenda that emphasizes non-intervention and appeals to perceptions of inequality in the global system. In short, open authoritarian regimes have become particularly adept at reaping the benefits of international connectivity while sidestepping the costs of conditionality and liberal reform that are typically required by the liberal international community.

Second, we submit that open authoritarian regimes increasingly excel at domestic control through a strategy of *sociopolitical leapfrogging*. The concept of leapfrogging has often been applied to technologies; for example, developing countries can provide phone coverage to their populations by skipping to cell phone technologies, bypassing the costly interim step of land lines. Alexander Gerschenkron, seeking to understand how economically backward countries catch up to those more advanced, developed the notion of institutional leapfrogging. He examined strategies that countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries used to accumulate capital

to industrialize and found that countries late to enter the industrialization arena were able to both imitate and innovate upon the strategies used by earlier industrializers.<sup>6</sup> In this spirit, we argue that open authoritarian regimes are adept at policy leapfrogging, bypassing less efficient or failed social, economic, and domestic political policies for more successful ones that they both mimic and improve upon. Open authoritarian governments observe the at times haphazard policy experimentation of democratic countries, cherry-pick the most promising policies, and apply them in their countries in an incremental and controlled manner. They are as connected to the international system as democracies—economically, technologically, militarily—and thus their elites are increasingly as able as democracies to respond adaptively to domestic and external pressures for reform.

We conceptualize open authoritarian regimes as domestic political systems that, due to the very nature of connectivity in the international system, are strategically placed to arbitrage their consumption of international public goods. Open authoritarian regimes take from the liberal world a set of successful policies and ideas that have been vetted through democratic checks and balances while at the same time free riding on the international capitalist system. They have also been at the forefront of innovating alternative modes of governance that sustain their regimes. These include, most prominently: a sustainable mode of state-controlled capitalism many now recognize as “the Beijing Consensus;” an increasingly assertive foreign policy stance that privileges statism and communal rights over liberal conceptions of individual rights; and a set of domestic policies designed to protect themselves against the threat of electoral revolutions.<sup>7</sup> The Janus-faced open authoritarian state enables its own survival by combining sociopolitical leapfrogging and selective interconnectivity to keep delivering on, and when necessary modifying, its unique state-society compact.<sup>8</sup> In short, open authoritarian regimes are increasingly able to sustain themselves as a result of a dual posture vis-à-vis the rest of the world: plugged into the international economy to reap the spoils of connectivity, and insulated as a group from international pressures that many scholars have to date assumed would lead to their downfall through democratic transition.

### THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The concept of open authoritarianism challenges predominant paradigms of political science in at least three important ways. First, we reject the notion that the processes of globalization and interconnectivity are necessarily homogenizing. The concept of a flattening world in which economic integration leads to political and social normalization is deeply embedded in American political thought. Our insight here is that open authoritarian regimes are using precisely the processes of globalization—through strategies of selective interconnectivity and sociopolitical leapfrogging—to

maintain their non-democratic, non-western orientation. We argue that more attention should be paid to the proliferation of preferential connectivity in the international system and to examining the variation in the content and consequences of that connectivity.

Second, we break free from the teleological notion that all nations eventually evolve into democracies. This dominant normative inclination is evident in the transitions literature, as well as in the manner in which political scientists conceptualize “stalled” transitions or democratic “backsliding.” Here, we posit that non-democracy can exist at a stable equilibrium. The challenge of this project is to highlight the mechanisms through which the international environment can support that equilibrium.

Third, our work illustrates a pathway through which states can modernize socially and economically, and perhaps even politically at the margins, without democracy in any recognizable form. Critics will inevitably argue that institutions borrowed and adapted from democratic countries will eventually take on liberalizing tendencies and that connectivity with the liberal international order will someday transform these regimes. In defining the equilibrium that open authoritarian regimes currently inhabit, we believe we shift the burden of proof to the other side.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Our research suggests a set of “gut-wrenching choices” for American foreign policymakers. The basis of our argument is that open authoritarian regimes appear to be particularly sustainable given the international environment in which they currently coexist. Because many of the states we include under this rubric—such as China, Russia, and Singapore—are gaining increasing influence in international politics, this presents a number of tough questions for U.S. policymakers. Below we outline three interconnected dilemmas.

First, does the United States need to formalize and clarify its position on the question of sovereignty and international intervention? American hypocrisy on this issue is widely recognized. On the one hand, the United States has refused to participate in international treaties (e.g., the Kyoto Protocol) and international organizations (e.g., the International Criminal Court) that could delimit foreign policy flexibility. On the other hand, the American government has fervently defended its right to violate the sovereignty of others either when its own interests are at risk or when it identifies gross violations of liberal norms. Given the rise of the alternative ideology, espoused by open authoritarian regimes, of absolute sovereignty and noninterference, this hypocrisy becomes both more evident and more damaging. It has been doubly destructive to the cohesion of the international liberal order by weakening multilateral initiatives [Continued, Page 10]

as well as providing the impetus for notions of absolute sovereignty that reject liberal intervention altogether. For the sake of re-energizing the liberal international order, how must the United States reconsider its own doctrines on sovereignty, the use of force, and liberal intervention?

Second, will the United States continue to privilege political rights in the hierarchy of human rights and individual freedoms? The economic success of open authoritarian regimes is the linchpin of their sustainability—it offers legitimacy to the governance model itself and provides the resources necessary to satisfy and co-opt potential challengers. Regimes in the developing world have thereby diminished calls for political reform by overtly stressing the primacy of economic development. And, in most cases, they are delivering on their promises of raising standards of living. It is increasingly difficult for liberals to argue that economic development and political liberalization are necessary, or even compatible, co-travelers. Is the United States willing to reject this redefinition of human rights, for instance, by declaring that political rights are more important than economic development and poverty alleviation?

Finally, should the United States treat regime type as the defining feature of international politics? This strategy has been advocated—in the form of a Concert of Democracies—by some liberal interventionist thinkers, as exemplified in the Princeton Project on National Security,<sup>9</sup> and more recently the presidential campaign of Senator John McCain. Their logic is that democratic polities tend to share similar values and will therefore be more effective at managing global problems. Put aside the obvious danger of inspiring a counter-balancing coalition. The argument presented in this project cautions that powerful non-democratic regimes may be surprisingly sustainable. In the long run, if major players in global politics remain authoritarian, can the liberal West tackle the world’s most pressing problems—such as climate change, terrorism, and weapons proliferation—while excluding non-democratic regimes? How does the notion of sustainable open authoritarian regimes reshape the way in which we think about whether the United States should either engage or seek to isolate non-democracies? None of these questions are easily answered. But they all deserve serious consideration in the context of the rise of powerful and sustainable open authoritarian regimes.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See, *inter alia*, Huntington 1991; Diamond and Plattner 1993; O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; and Bunce 2003.
- 2 Authoritarian regimes are characterized by non-democratic central governments, lack of transparency, manipulation of the media, and active suppression of opposition and dissent. They are differentiated from totalitarian regimes—such as Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao, and modern-day North Korea—that use an even more oppressive form of governance based on charismatic leadership and ideology. See Linz 2000.
- 3 Our conceptualization of “open” regimes should not be confused with the literature on “closed” regimes, in which “closed” refers to the lack of electoral competition. Our definition of open regime does not correspond to genuine electoral participation; rather, it refers to the ability of regimes to

integrate into the international economy and thereby pursue economic and social modernization.

4 We acknowledge the existence of long-lasting “closed authoritarian” regimes, but an explanation for their sustainability is beyond the scope of this project. Furthermore, we do not claim that international openness is the only route to sustainability. Instead, we seek to elucidate the strategies that open authoritarian regimes use to survive, as distinct from those available to regimes the likes of Zimbabwe and North Korea. For a discussion of the former, see Case 2006. For a discussion of the latter, see Byman and Lind 2008.

5 Recent studies on the sustainability of non-democratic governments have focused almost entirely on the internal mechanisms of control, and the domestic pressures regimes face (For the importance of the role of parties in authoritarian stability, see Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2006. For the role of legislatures, see Gandhi and Przeworski 2007. For the role of institutional rules, see Lust-Okar 2007). Moreover, the international environment in

which authoritarian regimes currently exist is largely omitted from the democratization and broader regime transitions literatures. To the extent that it is studied, as discussed below, lines of inquiry focus on how international efforts in a variety of forms alter domestic debates and practices regarding democracy. Our perspective begins with the premise that all regimes sit at the intersection of the domestic and international arenas and develop complementary strategies to survive in both.

6 Gerschenkron 1962.

7 Barma and Ratner 2006; Barma, Rather, and Weber 2007; Spector and Krickovic 2007.

8 Skocpol 1979. Skocpol recognized that the state sits at the intersection of domestic and international processes and referred to this quality of the state as its “Janus-faced” nature.

9 Ikenberry and Slaughter 2008.

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MARUSKA, *Continued from Page 7*

an alternative lens, based on my assessment of the Gulf, to encourage policymakers to go beyond democracy promotion in the region. In doing so, I hope to have emphasized two main points. First, for the international community, promoting human rights may be an easier and smarter sell to the stable authoritarian regimes of the Middle East (the Gulf specifically) than democratic reform. Secondly, the positive effects that good democratic governance tends to have on a people—especially the protection and extension of individual rights—will not come to fruition in a state where the vast majority of residents are non-citizens. The Gulf states are unique, and they must be treated that way.

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ENDNOTES

1 Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates are #1, #5, and #25 respectively in 2008 GDP worldwide rankings.

2 Michael Ryan Kraig. 2006. “Forging a New Security Order for the Persian Gulf.” *Middle East Policy* 13(1): 84-101, 84.

3 S.516: ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2005. This bill and its 2007 successor both died in committee.

4 Tony Evans. 2001. “If Democracy, Then Human Rights?” *Third World Quarterly* 22 (August): 623-642, 628.

5 Ibid.

6 According to the Qatar Statistics Authority, as reported in “Males Out-number Females.” *Gulf Times*, 22 August 2008.

7 Thomas Carothers. 2004. *Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

8 Ibid., 15.

9 Jill Crystal. 2005. “Political Reform and the Prospects for Democratic Transition in the Gulf.” *Fundacion para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Dialogo Exterior (FRIDE) Working Paper Series (July):* 1-11, 4.

10 Carothers 2004, 7.

11 Jeremy Tamanini. 2007. “Dubai Inc: Development and Governance, not Democracy.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Arab Reform Bulletin* 5 (June): 1-2. It should be noted that this estimate was made before the current global financial crisis.

12 Human Rights Watch has perhaps voiced the loudest and most sustained criticism; other NGOs contributing their voices include the Solidarity Center, Amnesty International, and within Qatar, the government-sponsored but sometimes candid National Human Rights Committee.

13 Scholars point increasingly to the structural violence encouraged by the sponsorship system in the Gulf. They argue that the laws inherently create opportunities for and even encourage worker abuse. For an excellent recent treatment, see Andrew Gardner (forthcoming): “Engulfed: Indian Guest-workers, Bahraini Citizens and the Structural Violence of the Kafala System.” In Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, eds., *Deported: Removal and the Regulation of Human Mobility*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

14 Anh Nga Longva. 1999. “Keeping Migrant Workers in Check: The Kafala System in the Gulf.” *Middle East Report* Number 211, “Trafficking and Transiting: New Perspectives on Labor Migration,” pp.20-22, 22.

15 Suggested to me by Colonel the Hon. Alastair Campbell, Director of the Qatar offices of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). As my dissertation argues, the “securitization” of migrant labor in the Gulf is not natural or inherent; rather, the security threat is socially constructed.

16 Extending citizenship to these migrant laborers is highly unlikely; the dissertation-length version of this essay discusses the issue of citizenship at length.

17 Amy Hawthorne. 2004. “Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Democracy and Rule of Law, Paper Series (March):* 1-24, 19.